

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE TEMPLE OF JUSTICE

PART III: THE GOLDEN PATH





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
TEMPLE OF JUSTICE**

Part III: The Golden Path

Jupiter, Pete and Bob are finally back together and they resolve to unravel the case once and for all. More and more questions emerge. They find more leads, only to realize that they are facing a mystery that is unsolved for decades. Knowing that the villain is still on the loose, they set off to search for both the Fiery Eye and the Silver Hand. Unfortunately, time is not on their side. Eventually, The Three Investigators find themselves in a gripping adventure that takes them to the legendary Temple of Justice.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Temple of Justice
Part III: The Golden Path

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1. A Nasty Surprise

The First Investigator jumped out of the van.

“Jupe!” Pete and Bob shouted at the same time and ran towards him. Pete grabbed him by the shoulders, then hugged him fiercely. “You’re alive!”

“Of course I’m alive,” Jupiter said with a laugh.

“What are you doing in this van!”

“Are you okay?”

“You look terrible!”

“Where have you been?”

“What happened?”

The questions poured in on Jupiter, but there was no time for answers.

“Fellas!” Jupiter shouted over the chatter. “We’ll sort all this out, but right now I need a phone! We must notify Inspector Cotta immediately.”

“Of course!” said Pete. “The bad guys who abducted Mr White, right? Are they still around here somewhere? Should we better get out of here fast?”

Jupiter shook his head. “We really have a lot to sort out. Give me your phone, Pete!” The First Investigator decided to dial Cotta’s private number instead of the Rocky Beach Police Department.

Cotta answered immediately. “Pete! I’ve tried to call you. Did you turn your phone off? My people were at the marina asking about the *Raider*. We now know the name of the owner.”

“Me too,” Jupiter said with a grin.

“Jupiter? Is that you? Where on earth are you?”

“Near the mercury mine in Elizabeth Lake.”

“What? ... Why... What are you doing there?”

“I’ll explain it all to you, Inspector, but right now I’d be obliged if you could come here with a couple of police cars. There are a number of people to arrest. Also, you need to send someone to Santa Clarita Island. There’s a boy locked up in the old fortress on the island and he is desperate to be freed.”

Cotta wheezed on the other end. “Apparently you’re better than I feared. All right, we’re on our way!”

The First Investigator hung up. “There! Until Cotta gets here, we have time to bring each other up to date.”

To wait for Cotta to come, Jupe decided that it was best to stay out of sight. He locked the van and The Three Investigators went to hide nearby among the bushes.

Once there, Pete and Bob immediately pestered him again with questions and Jupiter tried to answer them as best as he could.

“Excuse me? Mr White locked you up?” cried Bob, stunned. “But... but we thought—”

“But how can that be?” Pete interrupted.

“You’ve been taken in by him, I’m afraid,” Jupiter said. “He told you a bunch of fairy tales when you were in his office earlier.”

“How do you know we were in his office?” Pete couldn’t believe it. “I thought you were locked up!”

Since it would take Cotta a while to reach here, Jupiter had the time to explain what happened to him in the last two days. Eventually, he did not even get to complete his story because a red-blue flicker had appeared on the horizon. A line of police cars approached from both sides of the mine and suddenly this remote area was crowded with cars and people. In a great cloud of dust, the police cars circled the white van.

When The Three Investigators saw Cotta getting out from a police car, they came out from among the bushes to meet him.

“Jupiter!” the inspector cried, startled. “You look terrible!”

“Thank you. I’m perfectly fine!”

“Do you need some medical attention?”

The First Investigator shook his head. “Later, but now I need something to eat. Urgent! Don’t laugh. I’m starving.”

“Officer,” Cotta said, addressing a colleague. “See if anyone has anything to eat in the car. And now for you, Jupiter—I’m not going to preach to you this time. You probably got yourself into this mess, but I also know that you didn’t voluntarily go missing for two days. So what are we going to do?”

“There’s the mine back there,” Jupe said. “I’ve locked up a few criminals. They all belong to Sphinx, the secret organization that is after archaeological treasures. The gang is also guilty of abduction and false imprisonment, as well as some other offences. Maybe you’d better arrest them first.”

Cotta nodded curtly. “How many are there?”

“Four.”

The Three Investigators got back into the van and drove ahead while the convoy of police cars followed them.

However, a nasty surprise awaited them at the steel door. It was open, and the chain lay on the ground with the open padlock next to it.

“What—” Jupiter stammered. “But how—”

Suddenly, the light of two mobile phones approached prancingly from the tunnel.

“Look out, they’re still in there!” Jupiter whispered and jumped away from the door, but he had already been seen.

“Gabriel?” Helena called from the tunnel. “There is no other exit. Wait a minute, I can see light! Did you get the door open?”

“Let’s get them!” Inspector Cotta murmured and signalled to his colleagues. “Are they armed?”

Jupiter shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“Take cover!”

The Three Investigators ducked behind a rock.

Helena stepped out into the open. “Gabriel, where—”

“Freeze! Police!”

Helena quickly overcame her shock. “Bruce! Get out of here!” she shouted into the tunnel and tried to run away, but she had no chance. Two policemen got hold of her immediately.

Four more policemen with flashlights rushed into the mine. The sounds of a brief scuffle echoed outside. Shortly afterwards, they led the beefy man in handcuffs out into the open.

Now The Three Investigators dared to come out of hiding.

Helena glared angrily at Jupiter. “You rotten fat—”

“Save it, Helena,” Jupiter interrupted her coolly. “It won’t annoy me anyway. Where is White? And Vikram?”

“How should I know?” she snapped at him.

“They took off while we were looking for another exit!” Bruce pointed to the chain on the floor.

“Gabriel, you traitor!” Helena roared into the night.

“But how—” Jupiter puzzled.

Suddenly something rustled. Someone groaned.

“Over there,” Bob whispered, “by the thorn bushes!”

With guns drawn, Inspector Cotta and another policeman went ahead. This time The Three Investigators followed them.

Behind the bushes in the darkness, two figures lay motionless, but it was not Mr White and Vikram.

“Dad!” shouted Pete.

“Dad!” shouted Bob.

They ran to their fathers. “We need an ambulance!” shouted Pete.

The next moment, his father moved and opened his eyes. “Pete! Thank goodness!”

Mr Andrews’s eyelids fluttered too. “What... where—”

“Dad!” Bob worriedly repeated and crouching down to help his father. “What happened?”

“He got the better of us!” Bob’s father sounded more surprised than angry. “We freed Mr White and his young friend, but then... they knocked us down!”

2. Hunt for the Fugitives

“You released them?” cried Jupiter in horror.

Only now did Mr Andrews notice the First Investigator. “Jupiter!”

“You’re here!” gasped Mr Crenshaw. He straightened up and reached for Jupiter’s hand. “Are you all right?”

“Everything is fine,” Jupiter said curtly and then turned to Cotta. “Inspector, the two of them can’t have gone far yet. They don’t have a getaway vehicle, I took it away from them.” A dark foreboding came over him. “Unless—”

“My Beetle!” shouted Bob. “Where did you park it, Dad?”

“At the side of the track coming in,” his father replied, straightening up with a groan.

“By the way, why are you even here?” Bob asked.

“When you suddenly turned around in Camarillo, we had to do something,” Mr Andrews explained. “We also turned around and took a guess that you went back to that office building. Nearing there, we saw you racing off, and we managed to follow you for a while until the Beetle couldn’t keep up with the pace. You were going northeast, so we were pretty sure you were coming here. Anyway, the Beetle made a hell of a racket on that bumpy track, so we left it by the side and walked in.”

Cotta nodded and sent two of his men to check on Bob’s car.

“Wait a minute! They could also make off with my car!” it occurred to Pete. “After all, we came from the other side, there’s still an access road.”

“You didn’t lock your car?” Cotta asked.

“I don’t remember,” Pete sighed, “perhaps not. We were in a hurry. If it’s not locked, they could just hot-wire it.”

“Brody, Jordan, you go to the other access road and look for a red MG! And call for backup to search the area!”

The two officers nodded and went on their way.

Pete turned back to his father and helped him to his feet. “So you released the bad guys, am I right?”

“What? An hour ago, Mr White was one of the good guys!” Mr Crenshaw defended himself.

“We were looking for you,” Mr Andrews took over. “That’s when we heard voices coming from the mine, but we saw that the door was chained up. We knocked on it and called out. Then a man came forward from inside. He said he was Mr White and someone had locked him up. We didn’t know what was going on... so we let him go.”

“How did you get the lock open?” asked Jupiter.

“It wasn’t a very good lock,” Mr Crenshaw muttered evasively.

“That doesn’t explain how—”

“With a piece of wire,” Pete’s father confessed. “Who do you think Pete learned his lock-picking tricks from?”

Inspector Cotta sighed resignedly. “I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.”

Suddenly, one of the policemen radioed in. “We have found the Beetle. There’s nobody here.”

“Keep close surveillance!” ordered Cotta. “Brody and Jordan, what’s your status?”

“We can’t find the MG! Only tyre tracks.”

Pete cursed loudly. “They stole my car!”

“I’ll put out an APB on your MG,” the inspector said. “What’s the licence plate number?”

Pete told him, and Inspector Cotta immediately ran to the police car. The Three Investigators and Mr Crenshaw and Mr Andrews followed him.

“Do you have any idea where they might be heading?” Cotta asked.

Jupiter nodded. “White will probably want to escape... so he might want to go home first to get some money and documents.”

“—Or back to his office,” Bob added.

“I’ll send a car there,” Cotta said and had Bob give him the office address. “Where does White live?”

“In Westlake Village,” Jupiter recalled, “but I don’t know his exact address.”

“No problem. His first name is Gabriel, right? We’ll find him.” Cotta relayed the information to the police control centre.

Meanwhile, the reinforcements from the local police arrived. Helena and Bruce were taken to the Elizabeth Lake Police Station.

Bob’s father, meanwhile, called the Jones couple to tell them that Jupiter had been found. “Your aunt almost fainted, she was so relieved,” he reported.

“Is she coming here?”

“No, don’t worry. I managed to convince them that there’s too much hustle and bustle here right now and that we’ll get you home safely in an hour or two.”

“I hope that the hour or two will be enough,” Inspector Cotta spoke up, “because it’s about time you brief me on a few details. After all, I can’t call a manhunt and have people arrested without knowing what they’ve done. So?”

Inspector Cotta, Bob, Pete, Mr Andrews and Mr Crenshaw—all looked expectantly at Jupiter.

“So,” Jupiter said, took a deep breath and began to narrate his story for the second time that night, but in more detail.

The red-blue flickering of the police cars painted unreal patterns on the rocks and the mine buildings, while the starry sky above them sparkled in the cold night air. None of the listeners noticed any of this.

“Jupe, that’s terrible!” said Pete sympathetically, putting his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “You must have been scared to death!”

“Well, it wasn’t exactly nice,” Jupiter murmured and suddenly felt the fear that he had been fighting back for two days now find its way into his stomach. There it immediately dissolved into warm, soft relief and Jupiter almost started to cry.

“And we blew it.” Bob bowed his head in dismay.

“Are you crazy? You didn’t blow it! You did an excellent job of investigating and putting White under pressure! He was lured into this trap because you assured him that I had recently been here to the mine. You also found the tracking receiver. Without you, who knows where I would be now!”

“So the story with the mine was really just that—a trap?” Pete asked. “We weren’t here for the Fiery Eye on Sunday?”

“No,” said Jupiter, “of course not!”

“And what you told White about the Fiery Eye,” Pete continued, “that it was just made up, and all—”

"I had to tell him something," Jupe interrupted. "Of course, the story was ridiculous and full of holes, but he was so obsessed with the Fiery Eye that he believed it."

Pete lowered his shoulders in relief. "I'm reassured. I was afraid you had lied to us."

"We're glad to have you back, Jupe," Bob said, "but I'm frustrated that White and Vikram got away."

Mr Crenshaw looked down. "I suppose Bill and I are not entirely innocent in this."

"But how could we have known that Mr White was playing a false game?" said Mr Andrews.

"Well—" Bob murmured, but did not continue.

"Spit it out, son!"

"If we had checked the boat register at the marina, we would have found that the *Raider* belongs to Gabriel White. Then we might have been suspicious."

"The *Raider*!" cried Jupiter. "Maybe White is planning to escape on it!"

"Goodness, what else?" Cotta was already reaching for the radio in the police car when the police control centre called at that moment.

"Officers from the Coast Guard have freed the boy on Santa Clarita Island," the policewoman's voice came over the loudspeaker. "He gave them the address of Gabriel White. We sent a car right away. It looks like White was already there. Somebody packed up a few things in a hurry."

"What a bummer!" Pete cursed. "The guy is—"

Then Jupiter heard the familiar roar of an ancient diesel engine. Uncle Titus's rusty pick-up truck came to a halt and his uncle and aunt jumped out.

"Didn't you say they were going to wait for me at home, Mr Andrews?" asked Jupiter.

"Apparently your aunt has changed her mind."

Aunt Mathilda ran towards Jupiter with her arms outstretched.

"Jupe! My boy!" She stopped in front of him, took his face in both hands and looked at it like a wonder of the world. Her eyes gleamed. Then she hugged him and did not let go for a long time.

3. The Case is not Closed

Wednesday, 17 September

Late last night, they were finally back in Rocky Beach. Never before in his life had Jupiter looked forward to his bed so much. Three seconds after sinking into the warm, soft pillows, he was already asleep.

He woke up in the middle of the night because he was terribly cold. He felt for his blanket. There was none. His mattress stank. He opened his eyes in horror.

He was not at home. He was still in his cell in the fortress on Santa Clarita Island.

It can't be! It is impossible!

... And it was. Jupiter woke up a second time—and was in his room. He had not been freezing, but sweating. The heat had felt like cold. His pyjamas were soaked with sweat. Distraught, he threw back the covers and forced himself to breathe calmly.

It took him a long time to fall asleep again.

The next time he woke up, the sun was shining into his room. The familiar sounds of the salvage yard drifted up to him. So Uncle Titus had reopened for business. That's good!

Jupiter went downstairs to the kitchen, where he was greeted by the smell of fresh pancakes—an aroma that had tormented him so much in the last two days. Only this time it smelled even more delicious—like home. He's back home!

"Jupe!" cried Aunt Mathilda, rushing over to embrace him again, as she had done a dozen times since last night.

"It's not going to be like this every day, is it?" Jupiter wiped a wet kiss from his cheek.

Aunt Mathilda waved it off with a laugh. "Sit down, sit down! Did you sleep well? Guess what, I called your school's director to tell him the good news. He granted you leave for the rest of the week... and also for Bob and Pete! Mr Amos said you'd been through enough and should rest until next week. Are you happy? Oh dear, you must be hungry, aren't you?"

He was. The taste of pancakes and cocoa overwhelmed him, so he ate in silence while Aunt Mathilda sat opposite him at the table, blissfully watching him.

"Why are you looking at me like that? You're scaring me, Aunt Mathilda. Your gruff manner is somehow... more familiar."

"It'll be back, don't worry," Aunt Mathilda said, "at the latest when we talk about your bike. Right now, I'm just glad it's over."

"Over?"

"Yes. The worry about you, and this... this terrible case! You're back! Even though the bad guys are on the run, I'm sure the police will find them soon. Besides, you'll probably be more careful in the future and not get involved in any dangerous things. This story has been a lesson to you, hasn't it?"

"The pancakes are really delicious, Aunt Mathilda," Jupiter evaded the question.

Aunt Mathilda frowned. At just the right moment, the phone rang and the First Investigator was glad not to have to continue the conversation.

Aunt Mathilda answered the call. It was her cousin. Relieved, she told her of Jupiter's safe return: "Yes! Trapped! In a real dungeon! Isn't that terrible?" Aunt Mathilda managed to embellish the dramatic story of his imprisonment even further. "... And Bob and Pete were

even with Solomon Charles! Yes, they were—Secret Agent Blake Turner!” His aunt sighed pensively. “I would have loved to have been there!”

After Jupiter finished his breakfast, Aunt Mathilda was still on the phone, so he cleared the table and went outside. He had a short conversation with Uncle Titus, who fortunately treated him quite normally. After that, he retreated to Headquarters. The old folders were still lying around. It seemed like weeks since he had dug them out of the old filing cabinet. Jupiter began to tidy up. Only the folder with the case ‘The Mystery of the Fiery Eye’ was kept on the desk.

He had just finished when Pete and Bob entered.

“You’re really back, Jupe!” said Pete with relief. “This morning I thought for a moment that I had dreamed it all. I was sleeping so soundly!”

“Just think, we won’t have to go to school for the rest of the week!” exclaimed Bob, beaming, but then he became serious. “How are you, Jupe?”

“Good,” Jupiter said. “I slept like a baby.”

“No bad dreams?” Bob asked. “The last few days have been difficult for all of us.”

“Everything’s fine, Bob,” Jupiter assured him.

“We had our fair share of problems too,” said the Second Investigator. “The search for you... and the fear for you... I blamed myself because we had such a fight at the mine. Sorry again about that.” The Second Investigator cleared his throat sheepishly. “—But everything’s all right now... apart from the fact that my car’s still gone. Well... it’s only a car. There are more important things, right? That you’re back, for example.”

“I am touched by your openly expressed affection, Pete, but may I remind you that we must consider not only the loss of your vehicle as a setback, but also a number of other things... in particular, there are still quite a few unanswered questions and unsolved mysteries.”

Pete rolled his eyes. “If you keep talking such pompous rubbish, that will soon be the end of my openly expressed affection. What kind of mystery, anyway?”

“Where is Gabriel White? Where is Vikram? But most importantly, where is the Fiery Eye? We now know that Rhandur never took it back to Pleshiwar, but that’s all, unfortunately. We should strive to unravel all the details of this case. Hopefully, this will make our search easier. If we—”

“Wait a minute!” Pete raised his hands defensively. “Stop, stop, stop! You seriously want to go on? You can’t be serious!”

Jupiter blinked. “I don’t understand your question.”

“You don’t understand my question? Jupe, you have been abducted by dangerous criminals and—”

“I have not been ‘abducted’. I was merely held against my will.”

“As if that makes any difference! White would never have set you free! He would have left you on that island to starve or worse—he would have—”

They were interrupted by a series of knocks outside—someone knocked on the Cold Gate.

“Visitors?” Bob was glad of the interruption. “I’ll go see.”

Bob went to the Cold Gate and opened it. Outside in the sun stood Gus.

“Gus! Come on in!”

Hesitantly, the English boy followed Bob to Headquarters.

“Hello,” Gus said, looking uncertainly from one to the other. He looked glum and stopped in the middle of the trailer.

“Well, slept in?” asked Pete.

He nodded. "Your guest bed is very comfortable. Thank you for taking me in for the night."

"You can also spend another night here," Pete assured him.

"I'll be happy to do that—one last night. Tomorrow I'm flying back to England. I've just booked the flight."

"That quick?" cried Bob in surprise.

"I have to go home. I've had enough. White is still out there somewhere. If I stayed here, I'd be constantly afraid he'd ambush me somewhere. I've been scared enough these last few days. I don't know how you guys put up with this all the time. Such adventures and constant dangers would not be for me in the long run."

"Not for me either," Pete said soberly.

Gus drooped his head sadly.

"What's wrong, Gus?" asked Jupiter anxiously.

He swallowed before answering quietly: "I'm ashamed of myself for messing up. I even lied to you! But I was so scared of White! I'm sorry."

Jupiter shook his head. "You lied to me, that's true. I was aware enough to see through White's plan. Without that ruse, I could never have brought him down."

"But I still—"

"It's the result that counts, Gus—only the result. Now stop blaming yourself."

"You're not mad at me?"

"No."

Gus breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed a little. "Do you think my father and I are safe in England?"

"White is wanted by the police. He should have enough to do to save his own skin," Jupiter said.

"Where do you think he is?" Gus asked.

"Maybe he's gone into hiding with Sphinx friends," Bob suggested, "or he's hiding out in a cheap motel somewhere in... I don't know... another state?"

"What do you think, Jupiter?" Gus wanted to know.

"White could be anywhere, but he won't take the risk of getting caught. For now, I don't think we have anything to fear from him, and neither does your father."

"Not from White, but from you!" Pete exclaimed and then turned to Gus. "That's because our master investigator wants to continue pursuing the case!"

"We should discuss this calmly," Jupiter suggested conciliatory.

"You always say that," Pete claimed, "and then five minutes later, we have to do it the way you want."

Jupiter smiled. "All right, Pete. Let's do it your way then."

"I wonder what that would be..." Pete murmured.

And then Jupiter said something no one would ever have expected: "We'll spend the rest of the day on the beach!"

Aunt Mathilda was happy about the boys' beach plans and immediately packed them a huge picnic basket. "You know what, boys—you are absolutely right! This day must be celebrated! And we have a good a reason to do so." She opened the kitchen window and shouted: "Tituuus! Close the yard! We're going to the beach!"

The Three Investigators were surprised, but could not possibly refuse her wish to go along. Without hesitation, Pete and Bob also called their parents. They all finished work as

early as they could, and one by one all three families and Gus arrived at the beach.

Pete had brought his surfboard and was trying to teach Gus how to surf, while Bob and Jupiter unpacked the picnic food. There were salads and sandwiches and eggs and chicken thighs, plus homemade lemonade and, of course, Aunt Mathilda's cherry pie.

"Great!" Mrs Andrews sighed comfortably and lay down on the warm sand. "Why have we never done this before? Our children are always out together—"

"—And get in trouble together," Mrs Crenshaw interjected.

"—And we hardly know each other," Mrs Andrews added. "We should change that!"

"We could start a support group," Pete's mother suggested with a wink. "—For parents of mystery-addicted teenagers." Immediately, all the adults joked around about how to deal with this problem.

"Our parents are ganging up on us," Bob murmured. "That's all we need!"

"Eventually, they'll calm down." Jupiter was convinced. "Come on, let's go into the water!"

As Jupiter jumped into the waves, the memory of his last encounter with the ocean flashed through him unexpectedly. That was when he had jumped off the jetty fully clothed to follow the *Raider*.

Suddenly he froze. He stood such that his upper body was warmed by the sun and let his gaze wander over the horizon. To the west, the outlines of a few small islands stood out. Santa Clarita Island was one of them. Jupiter shuddered.

"Which one is it?" asked Gus, who had suddenly appeared at his side. Bob and Pete were fiddling with the surfboard a little way away.

"The one in front. You can see the outline of the fortress."

Gus looked grimly across to the island. "I'm glad I'm flying home tomorrow."

"I understand that well."

"I will visit you again, but then without a case and without an abduction, I promise!"

"We would be delighted," Jupiter assured him.

"I hope the police get White."

"The police or us."

"So it's true what Pete says? You want to investigate further?"

"The case is not closed, so yes. I want White to pay for what he did. Don't you?"

"He's already paid," Gus said. "You took everything from him, Jupiter—his house, his job, his wealth. He's on the run now. Aren't you afraid he might want revenge on you?"

"All the more important that we find him. So, Gus... if you can think of anything else that might help us, perhaps some detail that you haven't told us yet—"

Gus nodded. "I'll think about it."

Bob and Pete came waddling up with the surfboard.

"You know what we think?" cried Pete. "—That you're still far too dry!"

He splashed them both with water and instantly a wild water fight began. Even Jupiter, who was not fond of childish pranks, got involved. He lunged at the Second Investigator to dunk him, but was himself pushed under the water by Bob. They frolicked like a bunch of primary school children.

When they returned to the beach twenty minutes later, completely exhausted but laughing, Jupiter had forgotten the events of the last few days for the moment.

Hungry, they made themselves at home with the picnic food. Afterwards they lay in the sun, full and satisfied, chatting, laughing and enjoying the relaxed atmosphere. Only after the last light of day had faded from the sky did they set off for home, dog-tired.

4. The Thirteenth Book

Thursday, 18 September

The next morning, The Three Investigators and Gus gathered at Headquarters to say goodbye.

"I have to go to the airport soon," Gus said. "It's best if I take a taxi, isn't it?"

"Absolutely not!" Pete shook his head decisively. "We'll ask Worthington, of course! I'm sure he'll be delighted to drive you! After all, you've been paying for part of his living expenses for years!" He called the chauffeur and spoke to him briefly. "Worthington is in the neighbourhood. He'll be here in ten minutes."

"Thank you! Then I don't have much time," Gus said. "I have something to tell you. I actually remembered something else about White."

"Really?" Curious, Jupiter leaned forward.

"When he forced me to ask you about the Fiery Eye, he also wanted me to ask you about something else, or rather, about someone—a man named Hank Cooper."

"Hank Cooper?" repeated Bob. That sparked a light in him.

"It wasn't the first time that name came up," Gus continued. "White mentioned it at our first meeting. He asked about Horatio's friends, if there happened to be a Hank Cooper. I'd never heard the name before. Then I was supposed to ask you about that man, Jupiter, but after you said you knew where the Fiery Eye was hidden, I had forgotten all about it."

"I know who Hank Cooper is!" exclaimed Pete suddenly. "He wrote the John Mercury series, right?"

"Exactly, Pete!" said Jupiter. "White had a couple of volumes in the fortress! He even held one of them under my nose and asked me if the book meant anything to me. What would the author of those books have to do with the case?"

They looked questioningly at Gus, but he just shrugged his shoulders. "I have no idea! But White expected you to know something about this Cooper, Jupiter."

"But I don't."

"Wait a minute," Pete muttered. "Then maybe it wasn't a coincidence."

"What was not a coincidence?" asked Bob.

Pete hesitated to answer. "I hardly dare tell you. We've already got one foot in the investigation again, and I don't want to be the one to put the other foot in."

"The case is not solved yet, Pete, whether you resist or not," Jupiter said.

"Spit it out now!" demanded Bob.

Pete sighed. "All right. You know, the day before yesterday, my father and I met Horatio August's old girlfriend, Bonnie Newman. She was a bit confused and mistook Dad for someone she wanted to lend a book to, and guess what? It was a John Mercury book!"

"Really?" asked Jupiter. His investigative instinct awoke. "Bonnie Newman gave your father a John Mercury book and Gabriel White had a couple of these books in the fortress? That's really no coincidence!"

Pete groaned. "So here we go again!"

"Come on, Pete," Jupe said. "I'm sure you want to know too!"

"Sure," Pete reluctantly admitted.

"Good!" Jupe said with satisfaction. "Come along, fellas! I have an idea!"

Jupiter stood up and left the trailer. He led Bob, Pete and Gus to a corner of the salvage yard where there were bookcases and boxes full of books under a rain shelter. Jupiter always had a good overview of the book inventory and quickly found what he was looking for.

He pulled three volumes of the John Mercury series out of a box—two hardbacks and one paperback—*John Mercury and the Mystery of the Pyramids*, *John Mercury and the Valley of Diamonds*, and *John Mercury and the Island of Man-Eaters*. He handed Bob and Pete one volume each.

“*Valley of Diamonds* was the book Miss Newman gave my father,” Pete said. “What are we supposed to do with it? Read it?”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “If we want to find out what feeds Gabriel White’s interest in these books, that may involve reading them.”

Bob had got hold of the hardback edition of *Island of Man-Eaters*. The dust jacket was already pretty battered, so as not to damage it further, he carefully removed it and handed it to Gus. Then Bob flicked aimlessly through the book.

Therefore, it was Gus who made the crucial discovery. “I don’t believe it!”

“What is it?” Pete asked.

“Here, the blurb on the dust jacket! It lists all the books in the John Mercury series!”

“So?”

“There are twelve of them. Volume thirteen is ‘in preparation’, it says here. The title is *John Mercury and the Temple of Justice*!”

“What?” cried Pete, snatching the dust jacket from Gus’s hand. “Indeed! I’m freaking out! What does that mean, Jupe?”

“We need that book!” Jupiter was already rummaging through the book boxes. Bob assisted, and Pete and Gus checked the bookcases. Eventually, they couldn’t find a copy of volume thirteen anywhere, or any more John Mercury books, for that matter.

They hurried back to Headquarters. Jupiter immediately sat down at the computer.

“Maybe they have the volume at the public library!” suggested Bob. “I’ll call Miss Bennett right now.”

But Jupiter held him back. “Save yourself the trouble.”

“Why?”

“This book never came out.”

“Huh?” Pete glanced at the dust jacket again. “But it says here—”

“It says ‘in preparation’. However, the John Mercury website says the book was announced but never came out because the series was discontinued.”

“Oh...”

“But there was already a synopsis of the story on the blurb which we can read here,” Jupiter continued. “Listen to this:”

John Mercury slides into a new adventure when his old friend Professor Kapoor from India asks him for help. His daughter Neha has been abducted by the members of a mysterious warrior tribe in the mountains! They will only release Neha if Professor Kapoor reveals his knowledge of a maharaja’s lost treasure. John Mercury rushes to the rescue! A path full of adventure and danger awaits him as he ventures into the mountains to search for the fabled Temple of Justice!

“Mysterious warrior tribe!” repeated Bob.

“A maharaja’s lost treasure!” shouted Gus.

“No way!” Pete looked over Jupiter’s shoulder to re-read the text himself. “I don’t understand it! How can such a book even exist!”

“It doesn’t exist, Pete,” Jupiter reminded him, “but that doesn’t change the fact that Hank Cooper obviously knew a lot about the Temple of Justice. We need to find out everything we can about him and this thirteenth book! His books are a few decades old now, but maybe he’s still alive.”

“Juupeeterrr!” Aunt Mathilda’s voice echoed across the salvage yard. “Mr Worthington is here!”

“Of all times...” Gus said with a glance at his watch.

The Three Investigators, Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus accompanied Gus to the street where Worthington was waiting with the Rolls-Royce. Both were happy to see each other again.

A short moment later, it was time for Gus to say goodbye to his hosts.

“Take care!” said Gus through the lowered window. “And call me!”

Jupiter nodded. Then the Rolls-Royce started to move. The Three Investigators watched the car until it had disappeared around the next bend.

They were about to return to Headquarters when a police car came around the corner. It stopped just before the salvage yard entrance and Inspector Cotta got out.

“Jupiter! You’re looking much better now!” the inspector said.

“Thank you, Inspector.”

“You have survived the horrors of the last few days well, I hope?”

Pete waved it off. “Don’t you worry about that! Jupe is at it again to—” he hesitated when the First Investigator gave him a warning look. “... Clean up... our trailer, I mean. Jupe is going to clean up our trailer.”

But Cotta had seen through the First Investigator. “You are busy with the case again, am I right?”

That’s when Aunt Mathilda intervened. “No, certainly not, Inspector! I have forbidden him to do so! Didn’t I, Jupe? We agreed on that!”

“Well, strictly speaking, we haven’t dealt with this subject very exhaustively, Aunt Mathilda.”

Mathilda Jones started to reply, but Inspector Cotta raised his hands defensively. “I don’t have time for that now. I just came by to give you an update on the situation.”

“Did you find White?” asked Bob.

Cotta shook his head. “There is no trace of him, along with that Vikram. We have searched White’s house. It is indeed full of art treasures—ancient vases, jewellery, items from Egyptian tombs... but the Silver Hand stolen from Mr Charles wasn’t there. Gabriel White and Sphinx have been busy in recent years. Maybe we’ll manage to nail down a few of his middlemen and contacts. Certainly we won’t be able to unhinge the entire Sphinx organization. It is too ramified and scattered all over the world for that. Anyway, White seems to have been one of the big players.”

“What about Helena and Bruce?” asked Jupiter.

“They are in custody and appear to be cooperative, but they say they have no idea where Gabriel White might be. So you should be careful.”

“Careful?” Aunt Mathilda asked.

“Judging by Jupiter’s descriptions, Mr White is a very deliberate and controlled man. He could be described as cold-blooded. However, he is prone to outbursts of rage as soon as something does not go his way. In other words, he is dangerous when he has control over a situation, but as soon as he no longer has control, he is unpredictable.”

“What are you saying, Inspector?” asked Uncle Titus anxiously. “That he might show up here... to take revenge on Jupe?”

Inspector Cotta shook his head. “No. The police are looking for him and he knows it. If I were him, I would go into hiding, but we don’t know what’s going on inside him. I just want you to stay alert, Mr Jones, and to inform us as soon as you sense anything suspicious.” He looked sharply at The Three Investigators. “And that goes for you guys too, especially you, Jupiter Jones. Are we clear?”

All three nodded silently.

Cotta gave them a long look. “Fine. I’ll be in touch if there’s any news. You guys too, please.” He got into his car and drove off.

The Three Investigators went back to the salvage yard and hurried towards the Cold Gate so they wouldn’t have to deal with Aunt Mathilda.

“Cotta is worried,” Pete noted. “Maybe we should stay away from this case after all.”

But Jupiter would have none of it. “If White really wants to retaliate, it doesn’t matter whether we keep our hands off the case or not. In fact, we are better off if we continue. That way we might be able to put a stop to him.”

It was difficult to argue against this reasoning. They set to work. While Bob checked on Hank Cooper on the Internet, Jupiter and Pete began to skim through the three John Mercury books.

But after a few moments, Bob had unpleasant news: “Hank Cooper has published a few dozen adventure novels. The John Mercury books were his most successful. However, Cooper passed away thirty years ago in a car accident. His last book was *John Mercury and the Island of Man-Eaters*—the twelfth in that series.”

“That explains why the thirteenth book never appeared,” Pete muttered, “and that’s the end of our search for Hank Cooper.”

“—For Cooper, maybe,” Jupiter admitted, “but not for the thirteenth book. Surely it’s possible that he could have written it before he died, or at least parts of it. After all, it had already been announced with a synopsis of the story.”

“And how are you going to find out?” Pete asked.

“By calling the publisher!” shouted Bob.

A few moments later, Bob had phoned through to the publisher and had Mrs Butler on the other end. She was the lady in charge of adventure novels.

“John Mercury!” she remarked in amazement. “This classic series is enjoying great popularity again. We’re even thinking about publishing new editions. Only the other day, I had a very interested reader call about it.”

Bob was quick with his response: “Would that happen to be my teacher Mr White?”

“Yes, that’s right, that was his name!”

“Mr White put me onto John Mercury as the subject for my paper. I guess he’s a fan himself.”

“I had that impression too,” laughed Mrs Butler. “How can I help you?”

“I found out that a thirteenth volume of the series was planned at the time, before Hank Cooper passed away. Now I wonder—”

“—You wonder if he ever wrote that thirteenth volume,” Mrs Butler finished. “I’m sorry, but the mysterious thirteenth volume has been the subject of legions of John Mercury fans. I’m afraid I’m going to have to disappoint you, as with everyone else. Mr Cooper hadn’t even started work on the book.”

“But there was already a title and a synopsis!” Bob countered.

"Yes, but that doesn't mean anything. He must have had the idea for the new book in his head and told the publisher about it at the time. As far as we know, he hadn't put it down on paper."

"Hmm... weren't there notes or something? First drafts?"

"Sorry, no."

Bob did not let up. "Maybe there's something in his estate. Do you know who Mr Cooper's heirs are?"

Mrs Butler laughed. She must have found Bob's keen interest amusing. "Mr Cooper had no family. In fact, his estate is administered by our publishing house. We are also in possession of his original manuscripts. There's nothing in writing about volume thirteen, believe me. You're not the first to ask. I'm sure your teacher won't give you a lower grade if you can't report in detail about volume thirteen in your paper because I told him exactly the same thing."

"Well, thank you very much anyway, Mrs Butler!"

"You're welcome!"

After Bob hung up, he sighed in frustration.

"Couldn't it be that in reality Horatio August wrote those books?" pondered Pete. "— And Hank Cooper was his pen name?"

The First Investigator shook his head. "Hank Cooper died thirty years ago, Horatio four."

"So what? If Hank Cooper was just his pen name, he could have just let it die when he got tired of writing books."

"Possible, but unlikely," Jupiter said. "At the time the John Mercury books were published, Horatio August was a successful businessman and probably didn't have time to write adventure novels on the side. We can't rule that out, of course... I'm wondering more about the book Miss Newman gave your father, Pete. When you were with her, Helena was with her. That's what Helena told Mr White on our way to Elizabeth Lake." Jupiter's eyes narrowed. "What if—" He fell silent.

"What if what?" asked Bob. "Keep talking, Jupe!"

Suddenly the First Investigator jumped up. "I think I've got it! That's exactly how it must have been!"

"Jupe, please!" Pete was exasperated. "We're not in for another guessing game!"

But by then Jupiter had already grabbed *Valley of Diamonds* and was out the door.

"Where are you going now?" Aunt Mathilda stopped the boys in the salvage yard.

"We have to visit someone," Jupiter said.

"Visit?" Immediately she was alarmed. "Visit who? Why? Is it because of the case? Jupe, you can forget it!"

"We want to check up on Miss Newman. You know, the old lady Pete went to see with his father. We want to see if she's all right."

Of course, Aunt Mathilda couldn't say anything against that. Nevertheless, she hesitated.

"After that, we might stop by Solomon Charles's place," Jupiter added. "Bob told me that Mr Charles liked to be kept in the loop. We should tell him I'm all right."

"Oh, Solomon Charles!" Aunt Mathilda exclaimed and her face lit up. "That's different, of course. I mean... yes, go ahead and do that, but drive carefully!"

"Of course, Aunt Mathilda! See you later!"

"What's wrong with your aunt all of a sudden?" murmured Bob.

"She's a fan of Solomon Charles," Jupiter said, amused. "I think she even has his autograph card."

“And will you also enlighten us as to what we really want with Miss Newman?” asked Pete.

“We want to ask her if I am right with my theory.”

“And what is your theory?” Pete probed.

“That she gave your father the book to keep it safe from Helena.”

5. Another Visit to Bonnie Newman

They reached Oxnard less than an hour later.

“Let’s go then,” Jupiter said and walked towards the house. At the door, however, he let Pete go first.

The Second Investigator rang the bell. Instantly the door was pulled open and Bonnie Newman stood in front of them, gaunt and with loopy white hair. This time she was wearing a dress with a brightly coloured batik pattern.

“It’s you!” She stared at Pete in amazement. “I thought I’d never see you again!” Her eyes wandered to Jupiter and Bob. “Who are they?”

“These... these are my friends Jupiter Jones and Bob Andrews,” Pete explained in surprise. Miss Newman looked quite different to him. She was excited, but she no longer seemed confused to him.

“Jupiter Jones? I thought he’s missing!” Miss Newman exclaimed. “That’s what your father said the day before yesterday!”

“I’m back,” Jupiter took the floor. “We know you weren’t alone when Pete and his father turned up here that day, Miss Newman. There was someone in your house, wasn’t it?”

Bonnie Newman’s gaze flickered. She seemed unsure what to make of The Three Investigators’ visit. Her curiosity got the better of her. “All right, come in!”

She led the three of them into her small house. On the ground floor, there was only one room with a kitchenette. It was untidy, almost a little chaotic. Miss Newman didn’t have much furniture, instead there were art objects, most of them from Asia. Little Buddhas and Hindu deities in the form of figurines, miniature statues and pictures were everywhere. They stood on overcrowded shelves next to illustrated books about India. Some of the clay or plaster objects were broken and lay in two or more pieces on the floor.

Miss Newman offered The Three Investigators a seat on the floor, where there were colourful cushions. She herself sat down on a velvet-covered chair made of dark wood, which looked uncomfortable, and reached for a mug of tea.

Jupiter began by telling her that they were investigators, followed by an account about his disappearance and return; about Gabriel White’s evil machinations; and about Horatio August and the secrets that still needed to be uncovered. “Mr White was hoping for answers from you. That’s why his accomplice Helena came to see you.”

“Well, I can tell you more about that,” Miss Newman said, laughing bitterly. “The night before last, the doorbell suddenly rang. I opened it and there was this horrible person standing in front of me. She didn’t give her name and didn’t bother to explain anything either. She just pushed me back into the house.”

Pete sucked in a startled breath.

“She got straight to the point and asked about Horatio and the Fiery Eye.” Bonnie Newman sighed. “I always thought that one day that’s exactly what would happen. For years, I expected a man from India—someone with three tattooed dots on his forehead. Horatio had warned me about him. Instead, this blonde American woman who suddenly appeared, took me completely by surprise. Luckily, I had already made a plan a long time ago.”

“What was your plan?” asked Bob.

“Playing the confused old woman. I pretended not to understand her questions at all.”

“What kind of questions were those?” Jupiter wanted to know.

“She asked if Horatio ever told me anything about the Temple of Justice, in particular, in what way the Fiery Eye and the Silver Hand reveal the location of the maharaja’s treasure. All I kept saying was: ‘Horatio? Who is he? I don’t know him. When she realized I wasn’t going to tell her anything, she started rummaging through my things. She tore everything off the shelves and wasn’t exactly squeamish about it.” She pointed to the broken objects.

“I tried to stop her, but of course she was much stronger than me and just pushed me aside. She had just gone upstairs to my bedroom when the doorbell rang. She forbade me to open the door, but it rang again. Then there was a knock and someone called my name and finally... what’s her name? Helena? ... Yes, she said I should open up and get rid of the visitor. So I went downstairs and opened the door for you and your father, Pete, while she stood at the top of the stairs and overheard everything.”

Pete slapped his hand over his mouth. “Miss Newman, I’m so sorry! It all seemed strange to me, but... I had no idea! Otherwise I would have helped you, of course!”

“Don’t blame yourself for that. How could you have known that there was a criminal behind me. My first instinct, of course, was to ask you for help, but I didn’t know what Helena would do then. When you suddenly asked me about Horatio, I was completely perplexed! I realized that I suddenly had a chance to keep safe the only thing in this house that is of value to Helena. As she was eavesdropping on every word, I stayed in character and pretended to think your father was a neighbour to whom I had promised a book. I also had to get rid of you as quickly as possible, otherwise Helena would have become suspicious, but at the same time, I had to keep the book away from her!”

“So it really wasn’t a coincidence!” exclaimed Pete. “You wanted to prevent Helena from finding the book!”

“But why?” asked Jupiter. “I skimmed through it on the way here, but found nothing in the book that relates to this case.”

Miss Newman frowned. “You found nothing in it that relates to this case? Excuse me, but then perhaps you’d better leave the reading to your friends.”

Pete suppressed a giggle while Jupiter blinked in confusion. “Excuse me? But—”

“It’s all in there, as clear as can be! The Fiery Eye, the Temple of Justice—everything!”

“Er... The book was about diamonds in a valley in Africa.”

“That’s *Valley of Diamonds*.”

“Yes... the book you gave to Pete’s father.”

Bonnie Newman shook her head. “The book I gave him has the dust jacket of *Valley of Diamonds*... as a cover! Actually, the book inside is *John Mercury and the Temple of Justice*!”

Pete gasped. “Excuse me? Oh no!”

“What’s wrong?” asked Miss Newman anxiously.

“I get it now!” Jupiter exclaimed. “The book I read was from the salvage yard... not yours. Yours, unfortunately, is—”

—Gone!” Pete exclaimed. “Stolen... along with my car.”

“Your car was stolen?” Miss Newman exclaimed. “And my book was in it?”

Pete nodded in embarrassment. “It was Gabriel White. He needed a getaway car.” Quickly he explained what happened to her.

Bonnie Newman was startled. “Then that criminal now has my book!”

“We don’t know if he has found it,” Bob said, “but it is highly possible. What we don’t understand, however, is why does this book even exist at all! We were told that it was never

written.”

Bonnie Newman shook her head slowly. “That’s not true. Volume thirteen was written... and it was written by me.”

6. Horatio's Secret

Pete's eyes snapped open. "You're Hank Cooper?"

"No," Miss Newman said with a smile. "Hank Cooper died—I think it was—thirty years ago... yes. The John Mercury series was very successful then, and the publishers wanted new adventures even after Cooper's death. So they considered having other authors write more books, and a friend of mine who worked there told me. I always liked writing, so I wrote a manuscript. However, there were copyright problems because later they discovered that Hank Cooper had decreed that there could be no more John Mercury books after his death. That was why my book never came out. Today, probably no one at the publishing house knows about it. This happened decades ago."

"But the book you gave my father... was a real book after all!" remarked Pete.

"Yes. I had my manuscript printed and bound—only one copy—just for me."

"Why did you want to keep it safe from Helena?" asked Jupiter. "What does the book say?"

"How to get to the maharaja's treasure using the Silver Hand."

"Really?" exclaimed Pete. "You know that? How?"

Bonnie Newman smiled mildly. "I think it's time I told my story." The old lady took a sip of tea and her eyes turned to an indeterminate distance.

After a pause, while deep in thoughts, Bonnie Newman began her story: "As a young woman, I was hungry for adventure and full of desire to see the world. So I packed my bags and travelled to faraway countries. I ended up in India, where I started buying and selling handicrafts to earn money.

"I travelled a lot in the north, where the small villages in the mountains are so isolated that it sometimes takes days to get from one place to the next. I went to Pleshiwar at the foot of the mountains because I had heard that the tribes living nearby made interesting handicrafts."

"Wasn't that dangerous?" asked Pete. "After all, those tribes are described as very fierce and warlike."

"Well, whether someone is described as warlike or peaceful depends very much on the person describing them, doesn't it?"

Pete gave Bob and Jupiter a furtive look, not knowing what Bonnie Newman was talking about.

Bob took over: "As I have read, in the region around Pleshiwar, members of different ethnic groups and religions live together. This has often led to conflicts in the past, mainly between the Servants of Justice and the Shikaaree, a radical sect. Both parties were probably often fierce and warlike, but usually the victors end up being believed and the others were seen as the bad guys."

"I wasn't scared, anyway," Miss Newman continued, "but it was already late in the year, and the first snow was imminent. The local people warned me not to go into the mountains alone, especially to the one they call the 'Mountain of No Return'. People have accidents there all the time. That was exactly where my route took me. None of the mountain guides in Pleshiwar were willing to accompany me.

“Young and reckless as I was, I set off alone early one morning. It was a foolish idea. After only half a day, I was surprised by the snow. It was a real storm. I had not even reached the Mountain of No Return, but I knew I had to turn back. Suddenly, I saw fresh blood in the snow, and human footprints. I followed it and found a man who had taken shelter in a small cave. It was a young Englishman. He was bleeding from deep stab wounds.”

“Horatio August,” Jupiter speculated.

Bonnie Newman nodded. “He had lost a lot of blood. I put some makeshift bandages on his wounds. Together we made it back to Pleshiwar. By then it was dark. Horatio did not want to be seen at all. He begged me to hide him, which I did.

“For weeks, Horatio lived in the room I had rented. I attended to his injuries and brought him food. At first, he hardly spoke and would not tell me who he was or what had happened in the mountains nor did he tell me what was in the bag he clutched almost day and night. However, he left no doubt that he was on the run from someone.

“Finally, my curiosity won out. One night, he had let go of his bag in his sleep. I carefully took it and opened it in the light of a candle. Inside the bag was the Silver Hand, carefully wrapped in a woollen blanket. There was also a small wooden box. I tried to pick the lock.

“Suddenly Horatio appeared next to me. I hadn’t realized he had woken up. He put his hands on mine. ‘Don’t do that,’ he said. His gaze was so insistent that I no longer dared to even touch the box. He couldn’t keep me in the dark now, so he finally told me his story.

“He had always been an adventurous person who wanted to see everything in the world—just like me. He dropped out of school at an early age and signed on as a cabin boy on a merchant ship. He was in search of great adventure. At some point, he met people who belonged to a secret organization.”

“Sphinx,” Jupiter said.

Bonnie Newman nodded. “Sphinx enabled him to do exactly what he wanted—adventure and travel around the world. So from then on, he travelled in the service of Sphinx to search for treasures in distant lands. Then Sphinx sent him to India to search for the treasure of Maharaja Rajendra Sinha, together with a younger man who had just joined the organization.”

“Gabriel White,” Jupiter said. “He told me that Horatio was kind of a mentor to him.”

“Gabriel... yes. I never met him, but Horatio mentioned the name a few times. He was annoyed with his youthful companion and so had left him in Delhi to go north alone in search of the treasure.

“In Pleshiwar, he made enquiries, but of course it was more difficult than expected. The Temple of Justice, which was the first place he wanted to go, had mysteriously disappeared! But then Horatio met a man who claimed to have the key to the maharaja’s treasure—and he even wanted to sell it to Horatio! It turned out that this man had stolen the Fiery Eye and Silver Hand from the Temple of Justice years before!”

Bob remembered the story from their previous case. “The man, who was a temple official, had committed some offence. Fearing the Fiery Eye’s ability to expose his guilt, he stole it and took flight.”

“That’s only half the story, Bob,” said Miss Newman. “He wasn’t a temple official, but a spy. The Shikaaree, who had made it their business to find the maharaja’s treasure, had planted the spy there. However, the Servants of Justice found him out. The spy panicked. He stole the Fiery Eye so as not to be exposed by its magical property, and at the same time, he took the Silver Hand as well. Then he fled.

“Since the spy had failed in his mission, he did not dare to return to his employers, the Shikaaree. He was afraid of being punished, for he knew the Shikaaree would show no mercy. At the same time, of course, the Servants of Justice were after him.

“The thief wanted to go far, far away. To get money for his escape, he had to sell the Fiery Eye and the Silver Hand... but to whom? Everyone in the region knew what it was all about. Then Horatio appeared in Pleshiwar. As a comparatively rich European, he could afford to pay the price the thief had quoted. Horatio wanted the Fiery Eye and the Silver Hand, of course, because he thought they would lead him to the maharaja’s treasure. Meanwhile, the thief had hidden the two items in the mountains. They arranged to meet there for the handover.

“Somehow the Shikaaree had realized what was going on. Horatio must have acted suspiciously enough in his ventures for them to be watching him. The Shikaaree secretly followed him up the mountain. Horatio met the thief, paid him and took the Fiery Eye and the Silver Hand. Then the two were ambushed by members of the Shikaaree. There was a terrible fight. The thief died. Horatio was badly wounded by a knife before he could... defeat the attackers.”

The Three Investigators did notice the brief hesitation in Bonnie Newman’s voice, but the old lady was just so absorbed in her own memories that the boys did not want to interrupt her.

“Horatio wandered through the mountains for two days before I found him near the Mountain of No Return. Without my help, he would have died. ‘I didn’t know what I was getting into,’ he confessed. ‘I had no idea how dangerous the Shikaaree were. I cannot let them find me.’

“However, I still didn’t understand why he was so afraid of me opening the box. ‘Inside is the Fiery Eye,’ he eventually explained to me. ‘There is a curse on the stone. Almost every one of its owners has died tragically. Only in the Temple of Justice has it not brought misfortune.’ Horatio explained to me that he had only looked once at the Fiery Eye in the box, but had not touched it, nor did he intend to do so. It was to be the last time a human eye saw the stone for a very long time.

“‘There is a legend,’ Horatio explained to me. ‘If the Fiery Eye remains unseen and untouched for fifty years, the curse of the ruby will be broken. I intend to begin the fifty years now. However, I will be an old man by then... or possibly dead. Then my descendants will get the stone.’”

“And so it was,” Pete murmured thoughtfully.

“What happened next?” Bob wanted to know.

“I bowed to Horatio’s wish and left the box alone. I never set eyes on the Fiery Eye. I understood why Horatio was so afraid. The Shikaaree must not learn that he was still alive. So we secretly planned our escape. We waited until his knife wounds had healed sufficiently and then we left the place during a foggy night. None of us ever returned to Pleshiwar.”

Pete breathed a sigh of relief.

“Why didn’t Horatio return the two items to the Temple of Justice?” asked Bob. “Surely that would have been the safest thing to do.”

Bonnie Newman pondered for a while and then said: “Well, you mustn’t forget that Horatio was not a man of honour. He had paid a lot of money for the items. It didn’t matter to him that he wasn’t actually entitled to them. Even if he had a change of heart, with his injury, he was in no condition to search for a temple that the locals had believed to have disappeared. Don’t forget, the Shikaaree was after him, so the important thing for him then was to leave that place.

“So we went together to Delhi, where Horatio met up again with Gabriel, who had been waiting for him for weeks. Horatio told Gabriel that his search had been unsuccessful so neither he nor anyone else from Sphinx should ever look for the maharaja’s treasure again. He thought the Shikaaree were too dangerous.”

Jupiter nodded thoughtfully. “Gabriel White was snooping through Horatio’s things at the time, though. He saw the locked box and the Silver Hand, but he didn’t know what they were. Horatio told him that they were just worthless souvenirs. It was only a few weeks ago that White came across the significance of the two items in an ancient manuscript discovered after an earthquake in Pleshiwar.”

“Horatio had realized that he had only just escaped with his life,” Miss Newman continued. “Finally, he decided to get out of Sphinx. Then he came to California with me, and for a while, we were a couple.

“In any case, after some time, he was drawn out into the world again. This time, however, not as an adventurer. He founded a small trading company that quickly grew. For decades, he was on the road and we lost contact of each other. We did not see each other again until about thirty years later, after he had retired back here in California. To my surprise, though, he had changed his name to Harry Weston!”

“Did you ask him why?” Jupiter wanted to know.

“Yes. His answer startled me. Horatio had often been back to India because of his trading business, after avoiding the country for a long time. The Shikaaree actually got on his trail after years! So he ended his business, changed his name, and fled to the West Indies. I remember how he warned me to be careful if I ever met a man with three dots on his forehead. Three tattooed dots on the forehead—that is the sign of the Shikaaree.”

The Three Investigators looked at each other in surprise.

“Really?” Jupiter enquired. “The Shikaaree? I thought it was the mark to identify the followers of Dhaarmikwar—the Servants of Justice.”

“No. It is the seekers of the maharaja’s treasure who bear this identifying mark. Normally, this so-called *tilaka* is marked on the forehead with fragrant powder or paste. The fact that the Shikaaree have their symbol tattooed on their forehead says a lot. Everyone should always be able to see who they are dealing with. The Shikaaree are to be feared.”

“So... so Rhandur lied to us then!” cried Pete. “He said he came from the Temple of Justice! Instead, he was... he was one of the Shikaaree! We... we sold the Fiery Eye to the villain!”

7. The Path to the Treasure

Jupiter blinked. Unconvincingly, he commented: “Well, technically Gus sold it—”

“Why does that even matter now, Jupe?” Pete burst out. “We were all completely taken in by him back then!”

This news sent The Three Investigators into a tizzy. Eventually, Jupiter said: “Calm down, fellas! Rhandur did not succeed! If what White said is correct, Rhandur never brought the ruby back to Pleshiwar. That means that the Shikaaree never got their hands on both items. The Temple of Justice is still missing, along with the maharaja’s treasure. Something... must have gone wrong.”

The First Investigator turned back to their hostess. “That was a very exciting and revealing story, Miss Newman. It was so enlightening that I almost forgot why we came here in the first place—the book! What’s it all about? Why did you want to keep it safe from Helena?”

“When I was looking for a story for the thirteenth John Mercury book, I immediately thought of Horatio’s adventures in India. I used a lot of what he experienced there for this book. It was completed a short time before he came back to retire in California. I didn’t know that there was still danger from the Shikaaree, otherwise of course I wouldn’t have written a book about it. I’ve renamed the people and places and changed other things, but Mr White will still be able to recognize that much of it is actually Horatio’s story.”

“—Which is no big deal,” Bob remarked, “because he already knows it.”

“Right, but what he does not know is the way to the treasure. The thief confided something to Horatio then: ‘The shadow of the hand shows the golden path—when day and night, when sunrise and sunset, when heaven and earth are in balance.’”

“A shadow points to something?” Pete wondered. “This sounds familiar.”

Bob nodded. “This was exactly how Horatio left a clue to the hiding place of the Fiery Eye for Gus back then. I can still remember it: ‘The shadow of your birth marks both a beginning and an ending’. Now we know where he got the idea from!”

“Cheekily stolen!” Pete exclaimed.

“In this case, of course, it’s not about Gus’s birthday, but the equinox,” Bob continued. “The beginning of spring and the beginning of autumn—on these two dates, day and night are of the same length.”

“That is why they are the holy days of the Dhaarmikwar devotees,” Miss Newman added. “Not only is there a balance between day and night, sunrise and sunset are also exactly opposite each other. At equinox, there is balance between light and darkness.”

“And this statement about the shadow of the hand showing the golden path, is that in the book?” asked Jupiter.

“Literally,” Miss Newman replied. “Horatio was sure that meant the path to the treasure.”

“Hmm... The golden path to the treasure,” Jupiter said thoughtfully. “The treasure was mentioned in the write-up about the maharaja, the copy of which I found in White’s notebook.”

“As we know, nobody has found the treasure yet,” Miss Newman said.

“Why did you put that reference in the book without altering it?” asked Jupiter.

Bonnie Newman shrugged. "I was afraid this secret would be lost forever if no one wrote it down. Who knows... if the book was going to be published, I might have changed the manuscript. As it was, there was no need for that."

"And now Gabriel White has stumbled onto this vital information," Jupiter said gloomily.

"Not necessarily," Bob objected. "He had no idea the book is in Pete's car. He just wanted a getaway car. Maybe the car is on some dirt road, with the book still inside it."

At that moment, the Second Investigator's mobile phone rang. Pete glanced at the display. "It's Inspector Cotta! Yes, hello? Inspector? ... What? Really?" Then he turned to his friends and whispered: "Fellas, they found my car!"

"Tell me, Inspector Cotta, do you happen to know if there is a book on the back seat? Or anywhere else?" Pete listened to Cotta's explanations. "I see, oh... I see... Yes. Thank you." The Second Investigator hung up and looked at expectant faces.

"Come on, tell us!" Bob urged.

"The police found my MG in Thousand Oaks, near a bus station. Cotta believes White continued his escape on a bus. He could have gone in pretty much any direction."

"And the book?" Bob asked.

"It's not there."

On the way back to Rocky Beach, The Three Investigators stopped by Thousand Oaks Police Department and picked up Pete's MG. Relieved, the Second Investigator found that the car had not been scratched or damaged.

Back at Headquarters, The Three Investigators made themselves comfortable on the old armchairs with Coke and biscuits.

"The Fiery Eye," Jupiter opened the meeting.

"We need to find out where it had gone to then," Bob said.

"Why is that?" asked Pete. "White is after the Fiery Eye and the treasure. The Shikaaree are also after the Fiery Eye and the treasure. Why do we have to join them?"

"Are you serious, Pete?" Jupiter asked.

"To be honest, yes. I couldn't care less what they do. Let them bash each other's heads in. Why voluntarily put ourselves in the line of fire?"

"It is our responsibility," Jupiter lectured. "The treasure belongs to the Servants of Justice, and it is our fault that the Fiery Eye did not return to them then. If we had realized who Rama Sidri Rhandur really is, we would have advised Gus not to sell the stone to him. I want to make amends for that mistake. I consider it my moral obligation."

"Moral obligation," Pete repeated.

"Indeed... yes."

"I don't believe a word you say, Juve."

"Pete, just because you don't want to go through the trouble of further investigation doesn't mean you need to—"

"I'm not talking about going through trouble," Pete calmly interrupted the First Investigator. "If you want to keep on investigating, fine, but I just think you should at least be honest with yourself. It's not about a moral obligation. It's about putting a stop to Gabriel White. I've known you well enough, Jupiter Jones. You just want to settle a score with him."

Jupiter raised an eyebrow.

Bob cleared his throat and then promptly changed the subject: "The thing with your car gave me an idea. Rhandur was here with a car back then. There was a chauffeur, remember? He probably wouldn't have come from India."

“Bob!” exclaimed the First Investigator. “That’s a great idea!”

“Uh—” Pete said and raised his index finger. “What’s the great idea?”

“Looking for Rhandur’s car and his driver!” Jupe exclaimed. “Rhandur had not been in California for long, so his chauffeur could be from a car rental company—someone like Worthington.”

“It was a fancy cream-coloured Bentley,” Pete murmured. “I remember that clearly.”

“There are dozens of companies that rent out limousines like that, complete with a chauffeur, especially in Hollywood,” Bob said. “How do we find the right one?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Jupiter claimed and turned to the phone. He dialled a number and switched on the loudspeaker.

“Seven Pines Motel in Hollywood, you’re talking to Anderson, what can I do for you?”

“Hello, I have a question,” Jupiter said. He spoke a little lower on purpose and refrained from giving his name. He felt that it was not necessary to reveal that he was the boy the police as well as Pete and Bob had asked three days ago, as he didn’t have the patience to tell the whole story again. “I’d like to stay at your motel for a few days soon, and I’m still looking for a car rental company nearby that rents limousines with chauffeurs—for a movie première, you know?”

“Of course, sir, I can recommend an agency. Why don’t you try Star Car?” Mr Anderson gave a phone number.

“Thank you very much, I will do that. You have helped me a lot!” Then Jupiter hung up.

“Hotels and motels often recommend the same service providers, provided their guests have had good experiences with them,” he continued. “If Rhandur asked for a chauffeur-driven car at Seven Pines back then, he was probably recommended Star Car as well. Let’s try it!” He dialled the number of the car rental company.

“Star Car, good afternoon!” a lady on the other end announced.

“Good afternoon, my name is Jupiter Jones. I would like to rent a certain car, an old cream-coloured Bentley.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to disappoint you. Unfortunately, we no longer have that car for rental.”

“Not any more?” Jupiter asked.

“Yes, we used to have a cream-coloured Bentley. It was our boss’s favourite car, but unfortunately it was totalled... uh... some four years ago, as I was told.”

The Three Investigators listened up. “A total loss? Four years ago?”

“Yes, it was in a terrible accident—a collision with a truck. Our chauffeur Nigel was miraculously unhurt. Unfortunately, the passenger was not so lucky.”

8. The Serious Accident

“What does that mean? Is he—”

“He was seriously injured and was sent to the hospital.”

“Do you know the name of the passenger?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t tell you that.”

“Was he from India by any chance? A Mr Rhandur?”

“I really can’t tell you. I am new here. I only know the story from my colleagues.”

“Could you perhaps ask your colleague?” asked Jupiter. “—Or the chauffeur Nigel?”

But in the meantime, the lady had become suspicious. She had also probably realized that she had revealed too much. “Mr Hendrix no longer works at Star Car,” she said coolly. “And I can’t give you any information about our passengers either. Customer privacy rules.”

“Can’t you make an exception?”

“Sorry.”

“All right. Thank you very much anyway. Goodbye!” Jupiter hung up.

“My goodness!” said Pete. “Do you think the casualty could have been Rhandur?”

“Well, ‘four years ago’ is a relatively vague time specification,” Jupe said. “We can’t really tell at this point in time, so we need to find out more...”

“And how do we do that?” Pete asked.

“By asking the chauffeur.”

“But he doesn’t work at Star Car anymore.”

“No, but we know his name—Nigel Hendrix.”

From the Internet, there were several men of that name in California. On further scrutiny, they found one of them to be a driver for a movie production company.

“That could be him,” Jupiter guessed. He called the company, but Mr Hendrix was out, so he left a message asking the driver to call back.

“I have another idea,” said Bob, “namely the newspaper archives! If it was such a serious accident, maybe it was reported.”

It was a privilege for Bob, through his father, to have access to the archives of the *Los Angeles Times*. There, The Three Investigators had uncovered valuable information for their investigations many times.

“Good thinking, Bob!” praised Jupiter.

“Good timing as well,” Bob added. “My father is in San Diego for a meeting today, so he is not in the office. It would be a problem if he sees us there.”

“Let’s go now!” Jupiter said.

They went in Bob’s Beetle. Due to the traffic, it took a while to reach the skyscraper that housed the office of the *Los Angeles Times*. The building was bustling with activity as usual.

They took the lift down to one of the two basement floors. Here all the issues of the *Los Angeles Times* and many other major newspapers were stored in thick volumes filling endless rows of shelves. The newer editions could be assessed on the computer system.

As the three of them entered, a lady of medium age looked up from her computer monitor and took off her reading glasses. She was Mrs Grayson, the archivist. A smile spread across

her face as she recognized the three of them.

"The Three Investigators!" she called out. "How nice of you to drop by! How can I help you?"

"Hello, Mrs Grayson," Bob greeted her, and briefly explained what information they were looking for.

"Car accidents are not uncommon, of course," she said. "You will probably have to look for a while."

"We have a pretty precise idea of the location and the period in question," Jupiter said. "It happened about four years ago."

"That's great," Mrs Grayson said. "You should be able to easily search for that in the computer records. Bob, you know your way around here, so go ahead!"

It took them only ten minutes. "There!" the three shouted almost simultaneously when they spotted the headline on the computer screen: 'Serious Accident on Lankershim Boulevard'.

"There was a collision between a truck and an old Bentley," Bob summarized the article. "Nothing happened to the truck driver. The driver of the Bentley was slightly injured, the passenger seriously."

"On the photo, the accident looks really bad," Pete noted. "The truck hit the Bentley full on, badly damaging the left rear. It's a miracle the passenger survived."

"And look at this," Jupiter said. "The accident happened on the night of the sixth to the seventh of August."

"Gus's birthday!" cried Pete. "It was the very night we found the Fiery Eye and Gus sold it to Rhandur! Then it was actually Rhandur who was in the accident!"

"The newspaper report did not mention names," Jupiter tapped on the article. "We still can't be sure."

"Then how about we check for follow-up reports on the next few days?" Bob suggested. "We might find out what happened to the victims."

"Good idea," Juve said and they scoured through the newspapers up to three weeks after the accident. However, there was nothing more on the event.

"Geez, Juve!" said Pete impatiently. "It must have been! Look at the facts—the damaged car is a Bentley, and the date and time of the accident tie in with the last time we saw Rhandur. It was the curse! Or do you think it was a coincidence that the accident happened?"

"Accidents like that do happen," Jupiter said. "The cause was due to the truck beating the red light and—"

"Juve, you don't want to listen to what I've just said, do you?" Pete admonished the First Investigator. "It was the curse of the ruby! If Rhandur hadn't had the stone with him, nothing would have happened!"

"But the curse was broken," Bob interjected. "Horatio August kept it unseen and untouched for fifty years... and then Rhandur bought it from Gus. The curse should not apply anymore."

"Maybe it wasn't so simple after all," Pete suggested. "Maybe there are some other conditions that were not fulfilled, so the stone is still dangerous."

"Just a moment, you two," Jupiter said. "You are aware of the fact that the accounts of the curses came from legends. They need not be true."

"What about Rhandur's accident?" asked Bob hesitantly.

"Was just that—an accident. Cursed or not, the Fiery Eye is gone, and we need to find it," Jupiter decided and printed out the newspaper article.

They said goodbye to Mrs Grayson and left the newspaper archives.

On the way to the car park, the First Investigator's phone rang. An unknown number was displayed.

"The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking."

"This is Nigel Hendrix. You called my company earlier and asked for a return call. What's this about?"

"Mr Hendrix," Jupiter called out delightedly, switching on the mobile phone's loudspeaker. "Thank you for calling back. I have a few questions for you. You worked for the Star Car company as a driver four years ago, correct?"

"That's right."

"In your time of service, you were involved in a serious accident."

"It wasn't my fault!" shouted Nigel Hendrix. "The court has also established that beyond doubt!"

"I know that, Mr Hendrix. It's not so much the accident that concerns me but your passenger, Mr Rhandur."

Nigel Hendrix was audibly irritated. Jupiter knew he had hit the mark. "I'm sorry, who are you anyway? The message you left at my company said something about an investigation."

"That's right. My colleagues and I are investigating a case involving, among other things, a missing gemstone. This gemstone belonged to Mr Rhandur. You were the chauffeur for him at that time, weren't you?"

"Yes, that's right." Hendrix became thoughtful. "I had wondered if maybe one day someone would enquire about Mr Rhandur. After all, he was one of the most mysterious persons I've ever driven."

"Really? Tell us about him!" Jupiter asked.

"He had hired the car and my services for a few days at that time. I didn't know who he was because he hardly spoke to me, but his unusual appearance—the three dots on his forehead, his cane—stuck in my mind. The places he wanted to be taken to were also unusual. Normally, I drive people to red-carpet receptions with photographers, but Mr Rhandur wanted to go to a rundown junkyard in Rocky Beach, among other places.

"On the night of the accident, I took him up into the mountains to a deserted canyon. Rhandur only got out briefly and came back to the car ten minutes later. Somehow, I noticed that he was completely different, like, he seemed revitalized... and he was holding something with both hands."

"Could you see what it was?" asked Jupiter.

"Yes. He switched on the lights at the back and I saw in the rear-view mirror how he was turning a red gemstone between his fingers. His eyes lit up and I... got scared. Who comes back from a deserted canyon with a gemstone? I suddenly had a certain feeling that Mr Rhandur had... done something bad.

"But that's not just it... Moments later, he fell into a rage! I did not know what was wrong with him. The next thing I knew, he instructed me to go back to that rundown junkyard in Rocky Beach, and fast. I did as he wanted, and again he got out briefly. When he came back, he told me to get him back to his motel in Hollywood as fast as possible.

"When I was at the Santa Monica Freeway heading to LA, the traffic was heavy and Mr Rhandur insisted that I take another route. So I went up north to the Ventura Freeway. From there, I turned into Lankershim Boulevard and a while later—" Mr Hendrix fell silent.

"That's when the car was hit by a truck," Jupiter finished the sentence.

"Nothing much happened to me. I suffered a shock, but otherwise... Mr Rhandur, however, was brought to the hospital with serious injuries. With any other passenger, it

would have been natural for me to visit him, but Rhandur was scary to me. I had a guilty conscience but I still did not go to see him.

“A few days later, the hospital called me. Mr Rhandur was on the road to recovery, but he was very upset. He accused the hospital staff and the paramedics of stealing. He claimed that a valuable gemstone was stolen from him. Did I know anything about it? I confirmed that I had seen the stone, but I knew nothing about a theft. I had been unconscious for a short time after the accident.

“Three weeks later, Rhandur suddenly appeared at my door. He had just been discharged and was walking on crutches. He was breathing heavily and had lost his nobility and elegance. In fact, he was... hateful. At first I thought he wanted to blame me for the accident, but then he simply asked: ‘Do you have it? The ruby! Did you take it from me?’ I assured him that I had done nothing of the sort. I must have been so perplexed that he believed me.

“Later I learnt from my boss that earlier, Rhandur had even examined the wreckage of the Bentley, but could not find anything. When Rhandur realized that I could not help him, he turned around in a rage and limped away. I never saw him again.”

Jupe got all that he needed to know. He thanked Nigel and hung up.

“Phew!” Bob sighed. “Does that mean we now have to check out the paramedics from back then? And the hospital staff as well?”

Jupiter shook his head. “We can assume that Rhandur had already done that. As soon as he recovered, he would have gone after all the people in question. We know how persistent he can be.”

“Persistent...” Pete repeated. “Beautifully put. He would have threatened them like he did to us back then!”

“First, let’s recall what happened at that time adding in what Mr Hendrix has just told us,” Jupe said. “Four years ago, on the night of Gus’s birthday, we were at Horatio August’s house in Dial Canyon. After we dug out the Fiery Eye, those thugs confronted us.”

“The Black Moustache gang,” Pete added.

“Yes,” Jupe continued. “They demanded that I hand over the Fiery Eye, but I threw them the fake one. Then we ran off to the pick-up truck, where Hans fetched us back to the salvage yard. We had the genuine Fiery Eye then.”

Bob took over: “From what Nigel Hendrix said, Rhandur was also at Dial Canyon, only that we did not see him. He was waiting for his lackeys, the Black Moustache gang, to get the ruby and hand it over to him, which was what they did. When Hendrix was driving away, Rhandur looked at the stone and discovered that it was the fake.”

“It has a scratch on it,” Pete added. “Rhandur made the scratch himself to show us that it was a fake.”

“Yes,” Jupe said. “Then he got Hendrix to drive him to the salvage yard, where he confronted us. I handed the ruby to Gus, who eventually sold it to Rhandur.”

Bob took back the floor. “Hendrix then drove Rhandur away. At Lankershim Boulevard, they met with an accident. A truck rammed the Bentley, and the ruby was lost.”

“All the while, we thought the ruby was back in India,” Pete concluded.

“It wasn’t, so it must still be somewhere,” Jupe said.

Pete laughed. “That’s a sensational insight, Jupe—the Fiery Eye must be somewhere! And where?”

Jupiter stared thoughtfully into the evening traffic. “Come along!”

“Back to Rocky Beach?” asked Bob.

“No... to Lankershim Boulevard.”

It was not far to the place where the accident had taken place.

The truck had come out of Cahuenga Boulevard, which merged with Lankershim Boulevard. The junction was just above the Los Angeles River, which was continuous trapezoidal concrete canal throughout the city. Where the accident had occurred was a bridge railing that looked down into the canal. Apart from a narrow trickle in the middle, it was dry as it was most of the year. While the busy boulevard was brightly lit by street lights, car headlights and a few advertising signs, darkness reigned down there.

“What now?” asked Bob as they stood at the stone railing looking up and down the boulevard.

“The Bentley from Star Car came from the north,” Jupiter said, pointing to the cars stopped at the traffic lights on Lankershim Boulevard. Just then, it turned green. “At that moment, the truck came from the left, which should have been red,” Jupiter continued. “It ploughed into the back of the Bentley and spun the car across the road until it was stopped by the bridge railing, otherwise it would have plunged into the canal bed, seven metres down, and all those in the car might not have survived.”

“Look!” Bob pointed to a spot three metres away from them where the concrete of the railing had obvious scratches and damages which had yet to be restored. “It’s possible the Bentley crashed right here!”

“What good does that do for us?” asked Pete.

Jupiter stepped into the cone of light of a street lamp and looked at the newspaper photo again. “All the windows of the Bentley were broken.”

“Well, no wonder with that impact!” Pete said.

“If we assume that no one stole the Fiery Eye... wouldn’t it be possible that it was thrown out of the car in the accident?” Jupiter described a trajectory through the air with his hand that went beyond the bridge railing.

“You... you mean it flew into the canal bed in a high arc?” asked Pete. “Jupe! That could really be what happened!”

“But then the Fiery Eye would be lost,” Bob suggested, “or do you think no one has found it down there for four years?”

Thoughtfully, they looked over the railing into the depths, where a shabbily dressed woman was just pushing a squeaky shopping trolley full of stuff on the canal bed.

“Or it was washed away,” Bob continued. “The Los Angeles River doesn’t carry water very often, but it does a couple of times a year.”

Jupiter looked at the woman until she had gone under the bridge. “We’d better get going right away.”

“Going? Where to now?”

“Home. We need to find out how much water the Los Angeles River was carrying back then on Gus’s birthday.”

9. Beaver

Back at Headquarters, Bob immediately started looking for a weather database on the Internet. He quickly found what he was looking for and carefully read the entries from that time. After a long period of drought, August four years ago had been the month when a severe storm had put an end to the drought.

“It rained a lot—just two days after Gus’s birthday! The Los Angeles River must have swelled in no time, taking with it everything that had accumulated in the canal.”

Pete stated the obvious: “That’s it then. The Fiery Eye is gone.”

“Not necessarily,” Jupiter objected. “There are still a number of other possibilities that come into question, like—”

“That may be so, Jupe,” Pete interrupted him impatiently, “but we can’t check all that out! Not after all this time! Besides, back then Rhandur followed all the leads there were, and he found nothing. The Fiery Eye is gone... Lost forever... End of story!”

“Pete is right, Jupe.”

“But—” the First Investigator started, but then fell silent. He had run out of arguments.

Pete put a hand on Jupe’s shoulder. “Who knows... maybe it’s better if the Fiery Eye stays lost. It has only brought bad luck so far.”

The First Investigator did not want to be satisfied with that, but he didn’t know what to do either. He hated this feeling—but he was absolutely at a loss.

“How was it with Mr Charles today?” Aunt Mathilda enquired casually at dinner, while she poured a cup of tea.

Jupiter had completely forgotten that they had intended to visit Solomon Charles. “We didn’t go there at all. It took longer at Miss Newman’s.”

“Oh,” said Aunt Mathilda. Her disappointment was plain to see. With a sideways glance at Uncle Titus, she continued in a chatty tone: “You really should get in touch with him, after all he has done for you!”

“Yes, yes, we will,” Jupiter promised.

After dinner, Jupiter and his uncle cleared the table.

“I have something for you,” Uncle Titus whispered to him while Jupiter filled the dishwasher. “Your motorbike. I got it back from the marina today with the pick-up and put it back in the old shed.”

“Thank you, Uncle Titus!”

“But don’t let your aunt know that! With a bit of luck, she’ll soon forget.” He winked at him. “Rubbish—George has been complaining, though. Something’s up with his houseboat, so he’s living in the shed right now. The motorbike is taking up space for him. Guess what, he charged me five bucks—as a parking fee! He wants it every day now—as if it’s his shed. Maybe you should talk to him.”

“I will!”

Immediately after everything was clean in the kitchen, Jupiter went over to Coldwell Hill. He was still a little way from the shed when he noticed some movement between the

bushes. Jupiter stopped and looked more closely. There seemed to be nothing, so he continued on.

Suddenly the door of the shed flew open. Jupiter flinched. It was only Rubbish-George trying to pull a fully loaded shopping trolley over the threshold to the outside.

“Can I help you?” Jupe called out.

The tramp was startled. “Oh, it’s you! You are most welcome. The story about your return has already made the rounds.”

“Did you just see someone lurking around here?”

“The only one lurking around here is me,” Rubbish-George grumbled angrily. “I have to get my stuff out of there, otherwise there’s no place to sleep. Why? Because your stupid bone-shaker got parked in my weekend residence. Do you have to do that? There’s plenty of room in your junkyard!”

“In the first place, why are you here? Why aren’t you on your houseboat?” Jupiter asked as he let his gaze wander over the hill, but the figure he thought he had seen was gone.

“Construction is going on at the harbour. At seven o’clock in the morning, they start the jackhammers and tear me out of my sleep. So I have to live here temporarily. But now that I’ve run out of space in there, I have to move some stuff out.” He demonstratively tugged at the shopping trolley, but it was wedged at the door.

“So this is your moving vehicle?”

“Razor-sharp observation, master investigator!”

Jupiter frowned. He had already encountered a misused shopping trolley once today—at the Los Angeles River.

“Tell me, George... such a shopping trolley is a popular means of transport for people who have no fixed residence, isn’t it?”

“I have a permanent residence!”

“I don’t mean you. I saw a woman with a trolley like that today—in the canal bed of the Los Angeles River, in the middle of the city.”

“So?”

“I wonder why she walked on the canal bed. Why not along the road?”

“She was probably on her way home. Many homeless people live under bridges. I used to do that too. Most of the year you can do that... until the rain comes.”

Jupiter was electrified. “People live in the canal?”

“My goodness, yes. Is that beyond your understanding? Not everyone is as lucky as you and can live in their own house on their own property. Now help me with this stupid trolley!”

Jupiter lent George a hand, but only to free the door and get into the shed as quickly as possible. Then he grabbed his motorbike and pushed it out of the shed.

“Hey, what are you doing now? Are you taking that thing out of my living room after all?”

But by then, Jupiter had already put on his helmet and started the vehicle. Then he rolled over the uneven terrain to the road and roared away.

It took the First Investigator only half an hour to return to the bridge on Lankershim Boulevard. He parked his motorbike, climbed over the parapet and, in a crouching position, slid down the sloping canal embankment. Except for a little light falling from the road into the canal bed, it was dark down here. The tunnel was like a black hole.

Jupiter walked towards it. Something rustled in front of him in the darkness. “Hello?” he called out hesitantly.

There was another rustle.

"Is anyone there?"

"Get lost!" The annoyed voice belonged to a woman.

"Excuse me, I would like to talk to you."

The woman laughed, coughing. "Talk to me?"

Slowly Jupiter entered the tunnel. He had hoped his eyes would adjust to the darkness, but all he saw was a shadowy figure sitting on the ground next to a shopping trolley.

"I'm warning you, boy, I'm not alone!"

That was probably a lie. Jupiter heard and saw no one else. "I'm not a threat, I really just want to ask you a few questions, if I may."

"Do you have a cigarette?"

"Sorry."

"A few dollars maybe?"

"Yes, if you can help me," Jupe replied. "Have you lived here for a long time?"

"Why do you want to know?" she asked suspiciously.

"I'm looking for something. Four years ago, there was an accident right above here on the road. Something was lost then." Jupiter hesitated for a moment, but then decided to tell the truth. "A precious stone—a ruby, to be precise. It may have fallen from the bridge into the canal... and then I thought—"

The woman laughed, coughing. "You're looking for precious stones in our beautiful Los Angeles River? Ha ha! That's a good one!"

To Jupiter's surprise, another laugh echoed from the tunnel. The woman was really not alone! "Never thought of that before, did we, Cindy?" a man called out in a gruff voice. "Just looking for gold and gems down here, we could get rich!"

Jupiter already regretted having mentioned the ruby.

"Were you also here four years ago?" he asked the man.

"Ha! No, boy. None of us stays in one place for long. Sooner or later you get evicted... by the police... by crooks... by the flood."

Jupiter's hopes were fading. "Do you have any idea who might have lived here back then?"

"Am I with the registration office?" Cindy laughed, coughing.

"I might know," the man spoke up. "For a few dollars—"

Jupiter hardly believed that the man could really tell him anything, but he had to try. He reached into his pocket, pulled out five dollars and held them up to the darkness.

"Thank you, my boy," the man said without any mockery and a hand reached for the money.

"I'm curious about that, Rick," Cindy croaked.

"I remember the accident. I wasn't here myself, but a buddy talked about it for quite a while. Shards of glass rained down from the sky, he said at the time."

"Who was it?" asked Cindy.

"Beaver."

She laughed. "Beaver? He talks a lot when the day is long, Rick! Crazy stuff, mostly."

"Maybe, but he didn't make up the accident. The car was still up on the bridge the next day. I saw it myself. It was a fancy car, otherwise I would have forgotten about it long ago."

"A Bentley, wasn't it?" said Jupiter. "Do you know where I can find this man who was here at the time? Beaver?"

"Sheesh... I don't know. Haven't seen him in a while. This is a big city."

“Someone will know,” Cindy said. “Beaver is known as a colourful dog. Just ask around!”

“Thank you. I will.” And Jupiter already knew exactly who he would ask.

“Say, are you still all right?” Rubbish-George indignantly pulled his headphones from his ears. He was sitting on the floor beside a small gas cooker when Jupiter had stormed into the motorbike shed. “This is so typical—as if all homeless people know each other! The very thought is presumptuous!”

“Well—”

“That would be like me coming to you saying: ‘Hey, you’re overweight. I’m looking for another fat guy. You must know him!’”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“Of course you didn’t mean to. That’s why I’m saying it.” Engrossed, Rubbish-George turned away and muttered: “What’s the name of the guy you’re looking for?”

“Beaver.”

“I might know him...”

“Oh, but you just said—”

“I know what I said. That doesn’t mean there are no exceptions.”

“So you know this Beaver?”

“I know a Beaver. I don’t know if it’s the same one, of course. After all, there are many Beavers.”

“The Beaver I’m looking for is well-known and talks a lot of nonsense.”

“Then it’s him. Of course, a lot of them from the big city talk crazy. Why do you think I moved to Rocky Beach? They’re all too crazy over there.”

“Did your Beaver happen to mention a car accident?”

Rubbish-George was about to reply, but then changed his mind and sat back, relaxed. “Do you notice anything? We’re reaching a territory where information is no longer free.”

Jupiter sighed, pulled a dollar note out of his pocket and handed it to the tramp. Rubbish-George cleared his throat. Jupiter added another dollar.

“The answer is yes,” Rubbish-George said. “He’s been getting on people’s nerves for weeks with that accident. He must have been under that bridge where the car crashed. Glittery stuff rained down from the sky—gold, gems and stardust.”

“Gold and gems?” cried Jupiter. “That’s what he said?”

“Something like that, anyway, but he meant the glass of the car windows, of course! Beaver likes to spin things up. Case in point...” Rubbish-George held up his portable MP3 player. “I found this the other day. Beaver would have left it lying around thinking it was a secret service listening device. You know what I mean? Reality looks a little different to him than it does to normal people. He sometimes puts an old umbrella on his head to protect himself against cosmic radiation... and glass splinters are gems for him.”

“Did he say more about these gems?”

“It was broken glass, Jupiter,” Rubbish-George said very slowly, as if the First Investigator was slow on the uptake.

“Anyway. Did he say more about it?”

“He did.” Rubbish-George fell silent and grinned at Jupiter.

Jupiter gave him the last of his money. “That’s all I have. What did Beaver tell you?”

“That unfortunately he couldn’t prove it to me with the gems because—get this... because they would bring bad luck!”

Jupiter's heart leapt. "Was he really talking about several gems? Or just one?"

"I don't remember that... one, I think. That's not the point at all. It's that this gemstone would bring bad luck just by looking at it. Consequently, I too have never set eyes on this miraculous thing. No one has." Again Rubbish-George spoke slowly: "—Because Beaver just made it up."

"I need to talk to this Beaver! Do you know where I can find him?"

Again Rubbish-George scratched his beard. "Hmm..."

"I'm broke, George!"

"I don't want any money."

"So?"

"That motorbike stays outside—at least until they're done at the harbour."

"Deal!" Juve immediately said. "When do we leave?"

Rubbish-George was about to answer when a noise reached them. They both listened. Someone was creeping around out there! Footsteps approached.

Then the door swung open with a soft creak. "Oh, here you are!"

"Uncle Titus!"

"What are you doing here for so long? Your aunt wanted to say goodnight and you weren't in your room. She was about to call the police again!"

Jupiter knew immediately that he could forget about a night trip to Los Angeles with Rubbish-George. Disappointed and exhilarated at the same time, he turned to the tramp. "I'll see you in the morning, all right?"

"Okay."

Then Jupiter followed his uncle home.

10. Taken by Force

Friday, 19 September

Despite the late hour, Jupiter lay wide awake in his bed and stared at the ceiling. He would have preferred to leave for Los Angeles immediately, but even if he sneaked out of the house unnoticed, Rubbish-George would send him packing for waking him up in the middle of the night. For better or worse, he would have to wait until morning.

At some point, Jupiter finally fell into a restless sleep, dreaming of Gabriel White and thousands of rubies raining from the sky.

In the early hours of the morning, he woke up. It was still dark outside, but Jupiter knew that sleep was over. He got up and went to the window. A hint of dawn coloured the sky behind Coldwell Hill a soft blue, but the First Investigator's gaze was distracted by something. A faint yellow light flickered on the hillside.

A small flame seemed to be burning in the motorbike shed. Was it a candle? Jupiter remembered that Rubbish-George had a gas cooker with him, but it was still very early for a first coffee.

The First Investigator hesitated only briefly. A dark sense of foreboding overcame him and he slipped on his clothes and shoes. Quietly, he hurried down the stairs, out of the house, and ran down the street.

Shortly afterwards, he had reached the shed. Nothing could be heard from inside except the hissing of the gas cooker. Maybe Rubbish-George was just making himself a coffee.

Jupiter knocked quietly on the door. "George?" he whispered. "Are you awake?"

A groan came from inside. It sounded like a suppressed cry for help! Jupiter abandoned all caution and yanked open the door.

Rubbish-George was sitting on the floor tied to a wooden beam. He had a gag in his mouth. Out of wide-open eyes, he stared at Jupiter. "Hmmp! Hmmp!"

The gas cooker was in front of him, heating a tin cup that was already glowing red. Jupiter noticed the heat in the shed.

Careful not to burn himself, he turned off the cooker. The flame went out. Then, he took the gag out of George's mouth.

"Jupiter!" croaked Rubbish-George.

"What happened?" asked Jupiter as he started to untie the bonds on George's wrists.

But the tramp could not answer. When Jupiter had freed him, he reached for a bottle of water with a groan and carefully drank a few sips. He coughed and wheezed, but slowly calmed down as he rubbed his wrists. "Thank you, my boy!"

"Who did this? Who tied you up?"

"A man. I don't know him."

"Tall, slim, late sixties, mottled grey hair, full beard?" asked Jupiter quivering.

"N-no... The age is right, but he was clean-shaven, and his hair was blond. It wasn't real blond though, I could see that."

"It was White!" Jupiter was convinced. "He changed his appearance so the police couldn't recognize him."

“You hadn’t been gone long and I was busy making myself a pot of soup when suddenly he was standing in the doorway! Normally I’m prepared for sinister characters, but I had left my pepper spray in the houseboat. Suddenly, this guy had a knife in his hand and was threatening me!”

“What did he want?”

“He asked about you! Why exactly you were with me, what you wanted from me... but he already knew some things.”

“He must have overheard us from outside!” gasped Jupiter. “I had seen some movement in the bushes, but then I thought it was not important.”

“I played dumb at first, but suddenly he had a knife at my throat!” George continued. “I... I had to tell him everything! He wanted to know where to find Beaver. He tied me up and gagged me—and shortly afterwards, he just left. The gas cooker was on since then! The whole time I was afraid that it was going to tip over and set the shed on fire!”

“George, I am truly and sincerely sorry! I didn’t mean to get you involved.” Jupiter clenched his fists. “White is ruthless! And I should have guessed he was still around! I should have known!”

“Was that the man who abducted you?”

Jupiter nodded.

“Then you have a score to settle with him,” Rubbish-George surmised, his expression darkening. “So we have something in common.”

“You told him where to find Beaver?”

“I don’t know exactly where Beaver is, but I told him where I would look for him. The chances of finding Beaver are not bad.”

“George, you have to tell me where to find Beaver! Now! He’s in danger!”

“No,” said Rubbish-George, groaning as he got to his feet and knocked the dust off his trousers. Seriously he looked at Jupiter. “I’ll take you to him!”

Five minutes later, they roared towards the rising sun on Jupiter’s motorbike, heading for Los Angeles.

“George,” the ragged man in the worn pinstripe suit said in surprise, straightening up from his mattress bed. Rubbish-George had shaken him rudely by the shoulder, waking him up.

By now, the sun had risen and warm light enveloped the concrete skeleton of an unfinished office complex in the middle of Los Angeles. The man in the pinstripe suit was not the only one who had sought shelter here under the bare concrete ceiling, but everyone else was still asleep.

“I never thought I’d see you again—” the man murmured. “Haven’t seen you for a long time. What are you doing here so early?”

“You can go right back to sleep, Franco. I’m looking for Beaver. I believe he’s been staying here lately. Where is he?”

“Oh, Beaver. Poor fellow. He was attacked last night by some pig. He’s been up there ever since and he doesn’t dare come down. He’s a bit... you know—” The man called Franco made circling movements with his index fingers, but Rubbish-George no longer noticed. He climbed the concrete stairs Franco had pointed to. Jupiter followed behind.

The building did not yet have any exterior walls. The view from the fourth floor was magnificent. However, the man with the blond, half-length hair, sitting on the floor, was looking downwards in a bewildered manner.

“George,” he murmured. “Saw you from a distance. Who’s the boy?”

“A friend. He came with me because of what happened last night.”

Beaver looked at Jupiter out of pale blue eyes. “Last night?”

Jupiter nodded. “Did someone attack you? A tall man with dyed blond hair? He asked you for a gemstone, right? A ruby.”

Beaver nodded in disbelief. “How do you know about that?”

“I’ll be happy to tell you,” Jupe said, “but first I need to know—did you know what he was talking about? Do you know this ruby?”

Beaver nodded. “Yes. I always had this feeling... that one day it would bring me bad luck. That’s why I never showed it to anyone. I didn’t sell it either, so it wouldn’t get mad at me, you know? It had this dark aura... I thought if I was nice to the ruby and just left it alone... nothing would happen to me.”

“You found it one day in the canal bed of the Los Angeles River, didn’t you?” Jupiter asked. “After an accident had happened on the bridge.”

Again Beaver nodded. “I found it and kept it. Back then, there was this man from India who was looking for the stone, but he was not to be trusted. Luckily, it had been raining heavily. He finally accepted that the stone had been washed away and lost forever.

“For years, no one asked about it—until last night... when this guy came. He threatened me with a knife! I had to tell him my hiding place. Now he has the stone, but he’s a crook. He took it from me by force! That will bring him bad luck!”

Jupiter raised his head and looked out over the city, which was slowly waking up. To the south, a plane from Los Angeles Airport was just rising on the horizon.

The First Investigator nodded grimly. “We’ll see...”

11. Soft as Butter

“White has what?” cried Bob in horror. Jupiter had called his friends and immediately summoned them to Headquarters.

“He stole the Fiery Eye,” Jupiter in a grave voice, recounting his adventure in the early hours of the morning.

Bob and Pete were thunderstruck.

“I guess that’s it,” Pete said dejectedly. “White got the better of us!”

“And now he’s probably already on his way to India,” Bob surmised. “Three days before the 22nd of September, with everything he needs to find the treasure.”

“I called Inspector Cotta from Los Angeles and told him how White had changed his appearance,” Jupiter said. “Security at the airports are being tightened accordingly, but he was several hours ahead... and could even have a false passport.”

“So what do we do now?” Bob wondered.

Pete straightened up angrily. “We’re not doing anything now, Bob. The case is over! That’s it!”

“You want us to give up?” Bob asked.

“What else are we going to do? Go to India?”

“Well—” Bob murmured.

“Ha! As if our parents would ever allow that!”

They were lost in thought. The mood was in the doldrums. It went down even further when Aunt Mathilda’s voice boomed across the salvage yard: “Juupeeterrr! Can you come out here?”

“Oh no!” Pete remarked. “What now?”

“We’d better go and see what she wants,” Jupe decided. “Come on!”

At that very moment, Bob’s mobile phone rang. “You two go ahead,” he said, and Jupe and Pete left the trailer. Bob answered the call. “The Three Investigators. Bob Andrews speaking.”

“Bob! This is Solomon Charles!”

“Mr Charles!”

“I just opened the newspaper unsuspectingly and what do I read? ‘Missing Boy from Rocky Beach Found!’ Weren’t you going to keep me in the loop?”

“Yes, we were, sorry,” Bob admitted and sighed inwardly. He actually forgot all about keeping Mr Charles informed. So he bit the bullet, and told him what had happened.

Meanwhile, Jupiter and Pete went up to Aunt Mathilda in the yard.

“Jupiter Jones, are you actually trying to get me to die of a heart attack? Why weren’t you in your bed again this morning?”

“I, uh, had something to do and—”

“If you have something to do before sunrise, you can jolly well go to school instead!” Aunt Mathilda barked and continued to berate her nephew for the next few minutes. Jupe tried to explain but she wouldn’t have any of it. Pete fell silent, listening to the conversation.

Finally, Aunt Mathilda decided: “I think I’ll call your school director right now and ask him to cancel your leave of absence!”

The next moment, Bob rushed out from the Cold Gate and came up behind his two friends.

“Er, Mrs Jones,” Bob said, with his mobile phone still in his hand.

“Yes, Bob Andrews, you heard me right! That goes for you too!”

“Yes, but... someone wants to speak to you.”

“Me?” Aunt Mathilda took the mobile phone sceptically. She probably suspected a joke. “Yes? ... Oh! Oh, Mr Charles! Why yes, I know who you are! What a surprise!” Suddenly she was transformed. “What did you say? Today? Now? But... but... but you can’t, because —”

The Three Investigators held their breath and tried to guess what Solomon Charles said to Aunt Mathilda. “All right, if you insist... I’ll see you in a moment!” Mathilda Jones hung up.

“Aunt Mathilda, what’s that all about?” Jupiter dared to ask.

“He... he’s coming for coffee!” she said, stunned. Then she rushed out of the yard to the Jones house as if she were on her way to a rescue mission.

During the next hour, Aunt Mathilda barricaded herself in the house. Before that, she had shooed Uncle Titus out.

“Your aunt insists that I pick up some discarded cinema chairs from Venice now of all times,” Uncle Titus said to Jupiter before starting his pick-up truck. “Last week she was begging me not to buy them. Can anyone can understand that?”

Titus hadn’t been gone long when an old, black BMW rolled into the yard. A handsome older gentleman with white hair and a pencil-thin moustache got out. He wore a tailored black suit and shoes that shone in the sun.

Bob and Pete almost didn’t recognize Solomon Charles. The strange codger in the kimono they had met three days ago had turned into the well-known movie star.

With an engaging smile, he approached The Three Investigators. “How nice to see you again!” he called from a distance. “And so you are the prodigal son! Welcome back! Pleased to meet you!” He squeezed Jupiter’s hand vigorously. “Your friends were so worried about you! You’re lucky to have them.”

“I’m so thankful,” Jupiter said. “It’s nice of you to visit us, Mr Charles. However, I would like to know—”

At that moment, the gate between the yard and the house opened and a woman stepped out, whom Jupiter almost did not recognize as his aunt. Mathilda Jones had done up her hair, put on lipstick and she was wearing a breezy summer dress, which was most unsuitable for working in the salvage yard.

“Mr Charles!” she called, floating towards him. “What a pleasure!”

“You must be Mrs Jones, the good soul of The Jones Salvage Yard,” said Solomon Charles, conjuring from behind his back a bouquet of bright lavender-coloured lisianthus. “Solomon Charles,” he said in a velvety voice, grabbing Aunt Mathilda’s hand and planted a kiss on it.

Aunt Mathilda blushed like a schoolgirl and couldn’t bring herself to take her eyes off the actor’s beaming Hollywood smile to admire the flowers instead. “It’s an honour! I... I’m a big fan of yours! I mean of your movies. I mean of your work in... your movies, Mr Charles.”

“The honour is all mine. Please call me Solomon.”

Mathilda turned to the three boys and said: “Can you three take care of the yard? I’m busy.” Then she turned back to the actor. “Can I offer you a coffee? Or something else? I might still have—”

“Your fabulous cherry pie? These young admirers of your baking have raved about it to me. I’d love to taste it!”

“Yes, there should still be some left. Unfortunately, I didn’t get around to baking a fresh one. If I had known earlier that you were coming—”

“Please, Mathilda. You really have had more important things on your mind in the last few days. Bob told me everything this morning. What fears you must have endured for your boy! And yet you are now thinking of letting him go to India so that he can put a stop to that vile man—that Mr White. You are a very brave woman, Mathilda. A true heroine!”

“Huh?” was all Aunt Mathilda could manage.

“I’ll quickly set the table in the kitchen,” Jupiter suddenly shouted and rushed off towards his house.

“And I’ll make coffee!” Bob offered.

“And I... uh... do something too!” Pete stammered.

In no time at all, The Three Investigators had disappeared into the house. Bob and Pete could hardly stop laughing.

“Jupe! Your aunt! It’s a good thing Uncle Titus isn’t here.” Pete peered out of the window to the yard, where the gentleman Solomon Charles was giving Mrs Jones his full attention. “Your aunt has turned soft as butter. I can’t wait to see what’s next.”

“You... you let him go to India?” Titus Jones blinked in disbelief. “Just like that?”

“Of course not just like that!” replied Aunt Mathilda, slightly indignant.

Titus had returned late from his shopping trip and had just sat down in the kitchen with a sweaty shirt after unloading the cinema chairs, which The Three Investigators had helped with. The remains of the morning coffee party with Mr Charles were still there.

“It’s not like he’s flying alone. Bob and Pete will be with him... and Solomon, of course, uh... Mr Charles, I mean. He had that silver thing in his house for years, even though it didn’t really belong to him. Now he says he feels partly responsible for everything that has happened, so he wants to do something about it... but then, he’s no spring chicken although you don’t see his age at all. On the contrary, I find him extremely... spry. Yes, extremely spry...”

Aunt Mathilda abruptly began to clear the table. She didn’t even notice that she was pulling the plate from under Uncle Titus’s nose when he was just about to put a piece of pie into his mouth. “Solomon said he could use a little help, so he invited the boys to go along. Turning down an invitation like that would be very rude, don’t you think?”

“Well, yeah—”

“Since he asked them for help, you can’t refuse that either.”

Uncle Titus looked thoughtfully at the lisianthus, now standing in a vase on the table. He took off his glasses, cleaned them with a shirt tail and put them back on. “But I thought you were against it no matter what, because it’s too dangerous.”

“That’s what I thought too, but then Solomon made me realize that it would even be more dangerous to do nothing because that awful Mr White is still at large, you see.”

“It is, but if the boys run into him again—”

“It’s not like they are meeting him alone! They’re travelling with Secret Agent Blake Turner, ha ha! They couldn’t be safer.”

“You do realize that is just a movie character, don’t you?”

Aunt Mathilda looked at her husband reproachfully. “I’m not stupid, Titus. Look at it this way—the boy gets to learn something about the world! This is a once-in-a-lifetime

opportunity! Haven't we always said that we want to keep all paths open for Jupiter in the future, if it's within our reach?"

"Sure, but we always talked about the choice of college or—"

"College! He can go and see India! He'll learn a lot more about the world there than in college!"

"Sure..." Titus Jones cleared his throat. "Have you spoken to the Crenshaws and the Andrews yet?"

She nodded. "They were a bit surprised. It took some convincing. Mrs Crenshaw in particular is quite timid—no offence, Pete. She'd probably forbid you everything if it wasn't for your father!"

Pete nodded silently.

"Oh," said Uncle Titus. "I always had the impression that—"

"—But in the end I got them around," Aunt Mathilda interrupted. "The boys are going, and you know what? Solomon has even invited us to dinner when he gets back! At his mansion! Isn't that adorable?" She looked at the lisianthus pensively. "Such a gentleman!"

"Well, then—"

"Then that's settled now, right?" Aunt Mathilda said and then turned to the three boys. "You three shouldn't dawdle around like that, otherwise the plane will take off without you! And Jupiter Jones, I hope you don't expect me to pack your travel bag!"

The Three Investigators had listened to the conversation with open mouths. They could not believe it, but Solomon Charles had worked a miracle—Solomon Charles and Aunt Mathilda.

'Then that's settled now,' Aunt Mathilda had said.

And it was.

Later in the day, The Three Investigators were on a plane to India.

12. Pleshiwar

Sunday, 21 September

It had been cold all night. Jupiter had wrapped himself tighter and tighter in the heavy, but still far too thin woollen blanket. Now, in the early hours of the morning, the cold had crept under his skin. Sleep was over, although he was still tired.

They had been on the plane for over twenty hours. Thanks to Solomon Charles's generosity, they had flown first class. That had made the flight surprisingly pleasant... but the journey had not ended yet.

Immediately after landing in Delhi, they had boarded a smaller plane heading north. Then came a torturous four-hour taxi ride, during which the driver had overtaken, at breakneck speed, bullock carts, buses, hundreds of cows and once even an elephant—on a narrow road with oncoming traffic. In the evening, exhausted and drenched in sweat, they had finally reached their destination—Pleshiwar.

It had already got dark in the village at the foot of the mountains. That was a good thing, because if Gabriel White were here, they wanted to remain undetected. That was why they had decided against staying at the only real hotel in Pleshiwar and had persuaded Mr Charles to move into an inconspicuous little guest house on the outskirts of the village.

The actor had been accommodated in the only room with a stove. Jupiter, Pete and Bob had shared a barren room with green, blue and pink walls, a sagging double bed and an equally sagging couch. Everything had been musty and clammy. Cold air had seeped steadily through the window cracks.

After a hot and warming meal, the exhaustion of the journey had hit and everyone had fallen into a deep sleep—until the cold gnawed at their bones.

So as not to wake Bob, who was lying next to him, Jupiter carefully rolled out of bed. He wrapped the woollen blanket around his shoulders, went to the window and peered through a gap in the curtain.

The world outside was green. There was no sign of Pleshiwar. The village was on the other side of the building. Instead, terraced rice fields spread out in front of the window. Further in the distance was a fantastic mountain landscape, where the brown-green spotted hills rose steeply at first, before ending in a barren mountain range with snow-covered peaks. The cold seemed to flow down the mountain slopes and spread around the guest house.

"You're already awake," Bob murmured behind him.

Jupiter nodded. "Today is the 21st of September. If we want to reach the Temple of Justice in time, we have to leave soon. Hopefully we'll find it somehow."

Jupiter decided to ask their landlord first. The opportunity arose at breakfast, for which The Three Investigators and Mr Charles gathered in the dining room half an hour later. Breakfast consisted of some kind of rolled and stuffed pancakes, except they didn't taste like pancakes at all. The filling was a mash of hot and spicy vegetables.

The owner of the guest house, Mr Jariwala, had come to their table to enquire about his guests' plans for the day.

"We want to go to the Temple of Justice," Jupiter said, watching the man closely. Pete, Bob and Mr Charles had also stopped eating.

Mr Jariwala wobbled his head. That was neither a nod nor a shake of the head. Jupiter did not know what it was supposed to mean.

"The Temple of Justice," repeated the First Investigator. "Does that mean anything to you?"

It was that head wobbling again. "Yes, yes," Mr Jariwala finally said, "but the temple has disappeared."

"How can a temple disappear?" Bob wanted to know.

Mr Jariwala just shrugged his shoulders. "No one has seen it for a long time."

"And where was it before?" Jupe asked.

"Up there..." Mr Jariwala said simply, pointing vaguely to the window through which the mountains could be seen.

"We'd like to have a look," Jupe said.

Mr Jariwala looked at Solomon Charles with undisguised scepticism. "Are you a mountain climber?"

"Yes," Mr Charles asserted without batting an eyelid.

Mr Jariwala shook his head anyway. "Very dangerous," he said. "The way is long... and steep." Then he pretended to have forgotten something in the kitchen and left their table.

"That wasn't very helpful," Pete concluded. "What now?"

"I suggest we go to the village," Jupe said. "Maybe there's a tourist information office, otherwise we'll just ask in the shops or at the market or the people on the street."

"Then we'd best split up," Bob said.

"Good idea, but keep your eyes open for Gabriel White. If you see him, take cover and follow him if possible."

The night before, they had hardly noticed anything in the darkness. Bob and Pete were all the more overwhelmed now when they walked through the streets in daylight. Everywhere was bustling with activity. The people on the street were all black-haired and dark-skinned. The men wore carefully pressed trousers and shirts. Many of them had a turban on their head and adorned themselves with enormous full beards. The women had incredibly long hair and were dressed in colourful robes called *saris*. They all shared their space on the road with rattling motorbikes, rusty pick-ups, dented buses and old-fashioned wooden carts pulled by oxen or humans.

Then there were the animals—cows, dogs, cats, donkeys, goats. They were just everywhere, rummaging through the rubbish by the side of the road and not seeming to belong to or bother anyone. Only when they came too close to the wooden carts of traders or obstructed the traffic were they noticed and shooed away.

Strange sounds and smells emanated from the open shops, which were often only the size of garages. All the strangeness intimidated them tremendously at first. After Bob overcame his initial shyness and went into the nearest shop to ask about the Temple of Justice, he was relieved to find that the people were very nice and helpful, and most spoke English, though with an unfamiliar accent.

Two hours later, Bob and Pete finally met Jupiter at the village centre. Mr Charles was still so exhausted from the journey that he had gone back to the guest house to lie down for an hour. So the three of them stood at a noisy junction where motorbikes squeezed between vegetable trucks and cows standing around.

"It's the same everywhere," Bob reported. "Whomever we asked, they all told us that the temple had disappeared."

“—If they even knew what kind of temple we were talking about,” Pete added.

“We must not forget that there are hardly any Servants of Justice left in Pleshiwar,” Jupiter reminded his friends.

“And then all that head wobbling!” complained Pete. “I don’t know what they were trying to tell me, but there were a few people who warned us about the Mountain of No Return.”

“It was similar for me,” Jupiter said. “I even went to the maharaja’s summer palace on the outskirts of the city, but everything is cordoned off there because the building is still in danger of collapsing after the earthquake.”

Bob nodded. “We saw a few cracked houses.”

“—But I was able to find out one thing,” Jupiter continued. “A farmer who was on his way to a rice field advised me, like everyone else, not to go hiking in the mountains. Then he told me that he had seen a tourist this morning who had set off for the mountains accompanied by a young Indian guide with backpacks and tent and all. His description exactly matched—”

“Gabriel White!” shouted Bob.

“—And Vikram!” added Pete.

Jupiter nodded. “If Vikram is one of the Shikaaree, he will probably know the way to the temple.”

Concerned, the First Investigator looked at the pale disc of the sun, which was slowly approaching its zenith. “We are running out of time. If we don’t leave soon, it will be dark before we reach our destination.”

“How are we going to leave when we don’t know where to go?” asked Bob. “No one can answer our questions!”

The First Investigator nodded and looked towards the mountains. Thoughtfully he said: “Maybe we are asking the wrong questions. Fellas, I have an idea. Come along!”

“Rhandur?” Mr Jariwala frowned. “Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Rama Sidri Rhandur,” Jupiter repeated the full name.

“He used to live in Pleshiwar. Four years ago, he was in America. He had a bad accident there. When he returned, he may have been limping, and he has... three dots tattooed on his forehead.”

“Oh...” Mr Jariwala’s face darkened. “There is a man... He lives on the northern outskirts of the village near the rice fields in a small house. I know him only by the name of Raaz, but I wouldn’t get involved with him.”

“Why not?” Pete wanted to know.

Jariwala lowered his voice. “The three dots... are not a good sign. Hard for you to understand.”

The Three Investigators left Mr Jariwala in the dark about the fact that they understood that very well. They thanked him and went back out into the street.

The rice fields on the outskirts of the village could not be missed. The house of the man named Raaz was small and dilapidated. The paint on the walls was peeling and the shingle-covered roof was patched with corrugated iron.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” asked Pete doubtfully. “You saw how Mr Jariwala reacted.”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “There are three of us—now much older and more experienced than back then. What can happen?” He walked towards the house. Bob and Pete

followed him hesitantly.

At first there was no one to be seen. After Jupiter knocked on the door, a man came around the back of the house.

The Three Investigators were startled. They hardly recognized him. He walked hunched and his once wiry stature now looked haggard. The black hair had turned almost white. Where the three black dots had been tattooed on his forehead, three small scars now disfigured his skin.

Nevertheless, there was no doubt that he was Rama Sidri Rhandur!

He still had the cane of polished black wood with a knife blade hidden in the tip, but now he actually seemed to need it for walking. Little remained of his nobility and cat-like elegance. Only his eyes flashed sharp and alert as before.

Rhandur looked at them questioningly—then his eyes widened. “What?” His breath rasped.

“Good afternoon, Mr Rhandur,” Jupiter said politely. “You remember us?”

The man looked from one to the other and seemed to wonder if he was dreaming. “The Three Investigators from California. Hardly recognizable. What are you doing here? We met... ages ago! How did you find me?” His voice also sounded different—it was rough and brittle.

“It’s a long story. If you want, we’ll tell you. However, we don’t have very much time. We are here because we need your help.”

“My... help?” Rhandur’s irritation was clear to see.

“Quite so, Mr Rhandur.”

“My name is no longer that. The name was taken from me.”

Jupiter frowned. “Taken?”

“Like so many things.” Rhandur gasped hoarsely. The Three Investigators realized it was a laugh. “A long story too. Why do you need my help?”

“We want to solve a mystery,” Jupiter said, “and we know you can answer our first question—how do we find the Temple of Justice?”

The man’s gaze became piercing. “That’s why you’re here?”

Jupiter nodded. “You told us something different back then,” he began. “You didn’t come from the Temple of Justice, instead, you are from the Shikaaree.”

In terse words, the First Investigator outlined what had happened in the last few days. Rhandur’s face reflected disbelief, anger and fascination—and a range of other emotions the boys could not interpret.

“I didn’t think all this would catch up with me. I had finished with the Shikaaree.”

“You left your... community?” asked Bob.

Rhandur let out a rasping laugh. “Left? No... they cast me out. The curse of the ruby plunged me into misfortune. When the Shikaaree learned that I had bought the stone from a boy with their money, but then lost it, they took my name—and the rest.” He pointed to the scars on his forehead.

Pete cleared his throat sheepishly. “So it was really the curse of the Fiery Eye? The accident, I mean?”

Rhandur nodded. “I had underestimated the power of the stone. I thought I wouldn’t be affected if I bought the stone, as the legend says. However, what happened made me realize that the curse cannot be interpreted in such a straightforward manner. Apparently, it saw through me, and Rama Sidri Rhandur’s true intentions.”

“You see!” Pete murmured to the First Investigator. “I knew it!”

“But now, I am Raaz the farmer,” Rhandur continued bitterly. “You must feel satisfaction that the fearsome Mr Rhandur has fallen so low.” He jammed his cane into the ground.

“No,” Jupiter said simply. “We have no grudge against you, Mr... Raaz. We are here to prevent Mr White from taking a treasure that does not belong to him. To do that, we must find the Temple of Justice.”

“Justice,” Rhandur repeated thoughtfully. It was impossible to tell what was going through his mind at that moment. “Yes, perhaps it is time to provide some justice.”

He turned north and pointed beyond the rice terraces. “There’s a trail there going up the mountains. Follow it for a few hours. As soon as the trail ends, you’ll see a mountain peak called the ‘Elephant’s Head’. It is so called as it looks like an elephant’s head together with a trunk. Go towards it. At the foot of the mountain, go round it on the southern flank. When you see the Mountain of No Return in the distance, you are very close to the temple!”

13. The Elephant's Head

"I don't know, Jupe," Bob muttered as they walked back to their accommodation. "Rhandur still gives me the creeps. He was suspiciously quick to help us, don't you think?"

"Yes," Jupiter agreed.

"It could be a trap," Bob suggested.

"It could be one, yes, but I don't think he will betray us to the Shikaaree. You saw his scar and heard what he said. He owes them nothing more."

"I actually heard very clearly what else he said, Jupe," Pete said. "The accident happened because of the curse!"

"Pete, please. Not this debate again."

"You just don't want to hear anything that mentions a curse."

"You're right, I don't want to hear about the subject—at least not at the moment. We have more important things to do—packing up our equipment for the hike to the mountains, for example. We should leave immediately."

In Pleshiwar, they bought supplies for two days. Then they loaded their backpacks. Solomon Charles was now back in the party as he too, gathered his gear. The Three Investigators watched anxiously because they knew that the search for the temple would certainly be exhausting. However, the actor would not hear of their concerns. Only when they had reached the beginning of the mountain trail did Pete dare to ask him directly.

"Are you sure you want to come, Mr Charles?"

"Of course! That's why I'm here! Do you think I'm going to remain in the room and wait for you to come back? Besides, I promised the lovely Mrs Jones I would look after you."

"I'm just saying..." Pete muttered. "It will certainly be exhausting."

"Ha! I may look old, but I'm still very fit! So, what are we waiting for? Is your backpack too heavy for you? Do you want me to take something off you?" Solomon Charles winked at him and took the lead. Shrugging their shoulders, The Three Investigators followed him.

After they had rounded the first mountain spur, Pleshiwar was no longer visible and after about an hour, the rice fields also disappeared from the landscape. The trail became stonier and steeper—and Solomon Charles slowed down. More and more often he had to take short breaks. He tried not to let on and did not complain. It was impossible not to notice that the effort was draining all his energy.

In the afternoon, the mountain trail suddenly ended. Between rocks, scree and grasses, it was no longer possible to see where to go next. They looked around helplessly.

"There!" Suddenly Pete shouted, pointing across a valley to their right to the mountain range ahead. Close under the grey cloud cover, a peak loomed. The slope on the right curved like a trunk. At the top left was the hint of an ear. "The Elephant's Head Rhandur was talking about!"

Bob looked sceptically into the valley. It was deep and elongated and full of boulders. "Not an easy path."

"We can't take that into consideration," Jupiter said firmly, but then looked questioningly at Mr Charles. "This is going to be a difficult climb. Are you sure you can do it?"

"Yes," Charles said. "At least I'll try," he added a little more quietly.

Jupiter nodded. "Let's go then."

The way down into the valley was even more strenuous than expected. The steep slope under their feet caused the scree to slip again and again. More than once they staggered with their heavy backpacks and sometimes had to crawl on all fours into the valley. Their progress was very slow. Even after half an hour, the Elephant's Head hardly seemed to have come any closer. Finally, they had reached the bottom of the valley and were moving confidently towards the slope.

Then Solomon Charles stepped on a wobbly stone, uttered a startled gasp and fell.

"Mr Charles!" cried Pete anxiously. "Did something happen to you?"

"Oh, come on," Charles claimed and waved him off. When Pete tried to help him up, he groaned and screwed up his face. "Damn, I'm afraid so!" It soon became clear that he could only walk in pain.

"What do we do now?" asked Bob, perplexed.

"We have to turn back," Pete said, "or..."

Solomon Charles protested. "Absolutely not! You go on. I'm turning back. It was probably a foolish idea for me to come along. I didn't want to believe it, but I'm too old for this adventure."

"You can't possibly go back alone," Pete said.

Charles laughed. "Will you carry me?"

"No... but I can accompany you," said the Second Investigator seriously, "... at least back to the mountain trail. You won't make it up the slope alone!" He looked questioningly at Jupiter.

The First Investigator thought only briefly. "Pete is the most athletic and fastest of us. He can take you back to the mountain trail, from there you can make it to Pleshiwar on your own. Pete can then turn back and catch up with us somewhere near the Elephant's Head."

Everyone liked the idea. "I'm sorry, boys," said Solomon Charles with honest regret. "Secret Agent Blake Turner has to retire. Take good care of yourselves! Don't get reckless! If anything happens to you, your aunt will rip my head off, Jupiter. Do you understand me?"

"We'll be careful," Jupiter promised.

Pete left his backpack by a rock and took Mr Charles's instead. Then he supported the injured man and walked with him step by step towards the mountain trail.

Bob and Jupiter set off in the opposite direction—towards the Elephant's Head.

Soon it was uphill again—gently at first, then steeper and steeper. They got so sweaty and wheezy that they no longer exchanged a word with each other.

Every now and then, Bob glanced back. Down there, Pete's red backpack shone between the white and grey of the stones. At first, Bob could also make out Solomon Charles and Pete as small moving dots in the middle of a field of boulders. As time went on, even with binoculars, it took him longer and longer to find them. Soon, as the light was fading, he could no longer see them at all.

"We're almost there!" moaned Jupiter less than an hour later, pulling himself up a rocky ledge with the last of his strength. Finally, they had reached the foot of the Elephant's Head.

Up close, the mountain peak had lost its characteristic shape and no longer resembled an elephant at all. Jupiter wiped the sweat from his brow, closed his eyes and tried to calm his gasping breath. "I didn't think it would be so exhausting. My legs are shaking."

"What's next?" asked Bob.

"Go around the southern flank of the Elephant's Head until we see the Mountain of No Return in the distance," Jupiter recalled Rhandur's words.

"Will we make it before it gets dark?" asked Bob with a doubtful look at the sky.

“We’ll go on while we can.”

“And what about Pete?” asked Bob. “I don’t see him any more. I wonder if he’s already on his way back to us.”

“Certainly. From here on, we’ll mark our way with question marks. I have my chalk with me. He’ll catch up with us, don’t worry.”

“I don’t know,” Bob muttered. “The three of us apart again... that didn’t go well last time.”

“We can’t afford to lose any more time, Bob! We might have just another hour of daylight. Tomorrow morning at sunrise we have to be at the temple!”

“And what if we don’t?” asked Bob.

“I don’t know,” the First Investigator admitted, “but I fear that Gabriel White will achieve his goal if we don’t stop him.”

They only allowed themselves a short break. There was now something like a path again that led around the trunk of the Elephant’s Head. In many places it was overgrown or covered with rocks. There it went steeply down into the depths. In the darkness, it could be a deadly trap.

Around six o’clock, the grey sky turned darker and they could no longer see even three metres away. It was high time to find a suitable place for the night. They finally hunkered down between two boulders. Even though the ground was uneven and uncomfortable, at least the two boys were sheltered from the wind. Now, without moving, they noticed how cold it had become.

Bob and Jupiter unpacked their sleeping bags and wrapped themselves in them. Then they ate their dinner—two spicy dumplings. They had no cooker with them and no other way to make a fire, so there was only cold water to drink.

All this time, they had been listening for the footsteps of the Second Investigator, who might still manage to catch up with them with the last of the daylight. When it was pitch dark, they gave up hope. Wherever Pete was, he had to get through this night without them.

For a long time, their thoughts were with the Second Investigator, whom they knew did not appreciate being alone in the dark under normal circumstances.

“Do you think Pete is all right?” whispered Bob.

“I’m sure he made it as far as his backpack,” Jupe replied. “He’s got food and drink and a sleeping bag... so he can take care of himself.”

“We’re not so sure ourselves either,” Bob said. “I mean, it’s night-time and we’re in the Indian wilderness somewhere in the middle of nowhere looking for a fabled temple. That’s —”

“—A lot of guts... yes,” Jupe finished the sentence.

Bob was silent for a moment before asking: “Do you think this adventure will end well?”

Jupiter hesitated with his answer for a disturbingly long time. “I don’t know.”

All this time, Pete had hoped to find Bob and Jupiter once he had reached the Elephant’s Head, but they had not waited for him.

It had been time-consuming to get Solomon Charles back to the mountain trail safely. When Pete had finally turned back, dusk had already set in. He had run through the scree valley like a mountain goat, and finally he had got back to his backpack. However, the subsequent climb with his heavy backpack had robbed even the Second Investigator of the last of his strength. Now it was too dark to go on.

Pete shooed away all thoughts of loneliness, darkness and the countless dangers that might lurk in the wilderness at night. He was looking for a suitable place to set up camp when he saw a white chalk question mark drawn on a rock. So Jupiter and Bob had been here. That reassured him a little.

“It’s not so bad, Pete,” he muttered to himself. “There’s no one here, so it can’t be dangerous. You haven’t seen any wild animals either. You just have to get through the night, that’s all. Whether there’s a roof over your head or the open sky—what difference does it make?”

Of course it made a difference. After eating something and lying down in his sleeping bag under the shelter of a rock, he listened to the wind and other sounds of the night. Here a rustling, there a cracking, not to mention strange sounds that might have come from some animals after all.

And then there was this dragging noise. At first, it was so quiet that Pete wasn’t sure if he was imagining it... but then it came closer. It sounded as if stones were slipping away again and again.

Footsteps! There was someone coming!

Pete peered over his rock. He could see nothing, but over the slow, dragging footsteps, he heard a gasp—the rasping breath of a man. An icy shiver ran down his spine. He crouched down and did not move.

It was only hours ago that he had heard that rasping breath!

14. “I Win... Not You!”

Monday, 22 September

When Bob opened his eyes, he saw stars. The clouds had cleared and in the cold air, the night sky shone brilliantly. The horizon had become a little brighter.

Jupiter had already got up. He stood a little apart and paced to warm himself up.

“You’re awake,” the First Investigator noted with relief. “We should leave as soon as possible. We have a little more than an hour before sunrise.”

“I guess the morning shower is off then,” Bob muttered and crawled out of his sleeping bag. “Is the coffee ready yet?”

“The cold will wake you up, don’t worry,” Jupiter assured him... and so it was.

Five minutes later, after both of them had eaten a few small bananas, they were ready to set off. The last stage began.

Gradually, a mountain range peeled out of the night darkness on the horizon that they had not seen the day before. Bob recognized one of the steep peaks. “That has to be the Mountain of No Return,” he said. “I saw a photo of it yesterday.”

“Just before the mountain was where Bonnie Newman found Horatio August back then,” Jupiter recalled, “but Rhandur said that the temple is very near here. We have to search for it now.”

They had been walking for just twenty minutes and the brightness had faded most of the stars when Jupiter heard a noise—and stopped abruptly.

“Jupe, what—”

“Shhh!” the First Investigator hissed. “I heard a noise. Listen...”

They remained quiet and listened with bated breath. Moments later, Bob also heard the noise. It was the rustling of bushes.

“I think it is a little way over there,” Jupe whispered, pointing to an area a short distance away from their intended path. “I’ll go check it out. You stay here first.”

With that, the First Investigator crept towards the source of the noise. Luckily, there were boulders around so it was easy for him to remain out of sight.

Then he stepped around a bend—and stopped abruptly. He turned back and signalled to Bob to keep quiet and join him.

Bob crouched down and came up behind Jupe. “What’s going on?” he whispered.

The First Investigator said only one word: “White!”

Bob dared a glance over Jupiter’s shoulder.

A tiny tent was pitched behind the bend. At this location, the ground went steeply uphill to the left and steeply downhill to the right with the tent on the horizontal area in between. With his back to them, Gabriel White sat on a rock, warming his hands on a steaming tin cup. He was only ten metres away.

“It’s time, Vikram,” White said with a quick glance at the sky. “Take down the tent! We’re leaving!” Now Bob also saw the young Indian who had been crouching behind the tent.

Vikram obeyed wordlessly. Within a short time, everything was loaded into a backpack. “The temple is up there, sir, we can leave the backpack here.”

White stood up and smoothed out his outdoor clothes. He looked different without his beard and without his black suit, but now with dyed blond hair. His determined look remained the same as he looked in the direction Vikram was pointing.

"No," he said. "You carry the backpack."

"But... it's not far now," Vikram said irritably. "We won't need the backpack."

"You carry the backpack," White repeated. "I carry the Fiery Eye and the Silver Hand."

Without another objection, Vikram strapped the backpack to his back while White slung a leather bag over his shoulder.

"Up there?" he wanted to confirm.

"Yes. There's a narrow path. You can't see it from here."

"You sure know your way around here," White remarked.

"That was what the people in the village said when I asked for directions to the temple."

White nodded. "You know, Vikram," he said calmly, "Helena never trusted you, but I knew very well why I wanted you on my team."

"I am grateful to you for that, sir."

"Of course you are. After all, it was only thanks to my help that you managed to bring these two treasures here—back to the place of their destiny." He patted the leather bag at his side.

"I don't understand, sir."

"Oh, you understand very well, Vikram. You did not ask the locals the way to the temple. You knew where it is—and always have. I knew from the beginning what you were up to. You needed my money and my influence to get the ruby and the Hand. You'd never would have found either on your own. Now you want to find the maharaja's treasure that your Shikaaree friends have been searching for centuries."

"What? Sir, I—"

White continued: "But I don't blame you, Vikram. After all, I needed you as much as you needed me. Without you, I would never have come this far to this place. Let's just look at it this way—we used and betrayed each other, but I have the staying power. I have the last word, Vikram... I win... not you."

"I'm not with the Shikaaree, sir!"

"Do you think I never noticed how carefully you comb your hair to cover the three dots on your forehead?" White asked.

With that, White jumped forward so suddenly and rammed Vikram with his right shoulder. Jupiter and Bob flinched in shock.

Vikram had not expected the attack either. He staggered backwards towards the edge of the cliff. The heavy backpack threw him off balance. He only caught himself half a metre before the precipice.

White lunged at him again, pushing him with both hands. Vikram gasped and toppled backwards over the edge!

Bob suppressed a cry of terror.

They heard rocks slipping away—and then nothing.

"That pig!" gasped Jupiter. "We must stop him!"

But at that moment, Gabriel White pulled a gun out of his leather bag and approached the cliff edge. He looked down. Apparently he was pleased with what he saw, because he smiled. He put the gun back in his pocket and, without hesitation, set off.

Jupiter and Bob waited with bated breath until they no longer saw White and his footsteps had faded away on the stony ground.

"Quick, Bob!" Jupiter whispered.

They rushed to where Vikram had fallen. The ground gradually sloped downwards for two metres towards the edge before going down steeply. They carefully peered over the edge but there was no sign of Vikram.

“Jupe!” whispered Bob. “He... he’s—”

Then they heard a gasp. Small stones started to fall because something was moving just below the edge.

“Vikram?” whispered Jupiter. With White nearby, he didn’t dare to call out loudly.

More stones fell. Suddenly, a hand appeared.

“He’s alive!” gasped Bob. “We have to pull him up, Jupe!”

Under the weight of the two of them, stones and loose soil gave way and rolled towards the outstretched hand. Immediately, they backed off.

“Both of us cannot be at the edge at the same time,” Jupiter noted.

“Then I’ll go alone,” Bob said. “I’m smaller and lighter. You have to follow White!”

“But what if you fall—”

Bob walked further away from the edge, put down his backpack and took out a rope, which he knotted around a nearby boulder. He fastened the other end to his belt.

“I won’t fall,” he promised and put a hand on Jupiter’s shoulder. “I’ll catch up as soon as I’ve rescued Vikram. Now go after him, Jupe, or the whole mission will be for nothing!”

The First Investigator looked up at the sky. Bob was right. “All right. Be careful!”

The path wound in a large arc around the Elephant’s Head. Every now and then, Jupiter caught a glimpse of Gabriel White. It never occurred to the man that he was being followed. He did not look around once.

Jupiter stepped around another bend—and then suddenly, he was there! A rocky plateau spread out in front of him, with a cold wind sweeping across it. By now, the sky was almost as bright as day and behind the Mountain of No Return, the sunrise appeared as a hidden glow.

A little way from Jupiter, next to a couple of boulders, stood dozens of Indians in ceremonial dress. The women wore splendid *saris* and golden jewellery, the men wore shining *sherwanis*. Their faces were decorated with mysterious symbols. Some wore prayer chains around their necks. They had to be the Servants of Justice!

Gabriel White walked straight towards them. The Indians were startled by his sudden appearance. They spoke to him, first in a foreign language, then in English. Jupiter was too far away to hear his reply.

Gabriel White raised his hands placatingly. He said something and apparently succeeded in calming the Indians. Then he reached into his leather bag. Jupiter saw White present first the Silver Hand and then the Fiery Eye to the Servants of Justice.

Surprised exclamations echoed across the plateau. Then the men and women alike sank to their knees in reverence.

Jupiter felt cold anger in his stomach. He did not dare to do anything as long as the gun was in White’s pocket.

Then he recalled what Inspector Cotta had said about White: ‘He is dangerous when he has control over a situation, but as soon as he no longer has control, he is unpredictable.’ Jupiter had to wait and hope for an opportunity to take the gun from White.

The Indians calmed down. One of them pointed east towards the brightening horizon. Then he made an inviting gesture towards some boulders. One by one, they disappeared into an opening that Jupiter had not noticed before.

White went with them.

15. Exposing the Traitor

Bob lay down on his stomach and slowly crawled to the edge. With every movement he made, stones slipped from under his body and fell into the depths. He changed his position so that the stones would not fall on Vikram, who was somewhere down there. “Careful, Bob, careful!” he admonished himself.

Then, peering over the edge, he saw the boy! Vikram clawed desperately at a rocky outcrop, but he was held by his backpack. It had got caught in a small but firmly rooted tree growing out of the side of the rock face. The tree and the backpack had saved his life.

Vikram’s eyes widened when he saw Bob. “Help me!”

“I’ll try. Hold still!” Bob did not trust the sloping ground at the cliff edge. He crawled as close to Vikram until he could grasp his hand. “Bob Andrews,” he introduced himself with a grin.

“You’re Jupiter’s friend!” Vikram realized, his eyes widening in fear. “And you... help me?”

“Exceptions apply in cases of danger to life,” Bob replied. “Can you climb up? I can’t pull you up alone.”

Vikram tried, but his face was contorted in pain. “My leg is injured, and I’m stuck.”

“I can see that,” Bob murmured, looking at the backpack closely. “I have to get you free somehow.”

“I might fall.”

“Not necessarily.” Bob’s rope still had a metre of slack in it. “Here, hold on to this!”

Vikram released his grip from a protruding rock and grabbed the rope, first with one hand, and then the other.

“Good. I’ll try to get the backpack out of the tree now. Hold on!”

Bob’s plan had been to swing his right leg and kick at the backpack with it. As he did so, a large piece of earth suddenly broke away from under him—and Bob slipped over the edge!

Jupiter crept into the opening between two boulders. Behind it was a tunnel with warm, dim light coming from candles that stood in small niches in the wall. The narrow tunnel led deeper into the mountain.

Jupiter heard voices. He tiptoed as far as he could and peered cautiously around a corner at the end of the tunnel.

The Servants of Justice and Gabriel White had gathered in a cave. Jupiter noticed that sunlight entered the cave through several narrow crevices, and in particular, through an irregular-shaped window-like opening in the east wall. From here, the morning light fell precisely on the face of a life-size statue in the centre of the cave.

It was Dhaarmikwar, the god of justice. The blue-skinned deity with many arms sat elevated on a pedestal. One of the arms ended in a stump—clearly the hand was missing. The third eye on his forehead was just an empty cavity. The deity’s gaze was directed straight at the irregular window towards the rising sun. Behind the statue and around it, the cave wall was artistically painted. Jupiter also saw a few mirrors fixed onto the wall at odd positions. There was also one on the ceiling.

A few of the devotees were seated in a corner playing mystical spiritual music softly on drums and flutes. The rest of them kept their distance reverently and placed incense sticks on small urns lined at the feet of the statue. After doing that, they went to one side of the cave and chanted prayers.

A man came forward from the chanting group. He had a long, grey beard, and wore an orange-red robe. Jupiter suspected that he was a priest. The man raised his right arm and the music and prayers stopped. Then he addressed the devotees in a language that Jupiter did not understand. He talked for about a minute before turning to look at Gabriel White.

"I should translate for our guest," he said with a strong accent. "Today is a big day for us. We honour Dhaarmikwar at every sunrise and sunset, but twice a year at the equinoxes, Dhaarmikwar's power is especially great and we hope for the return of the Fiery Eye and the Silver Hand. This time we were especially hopeful. We had expected someone else to bring back what was stolen. Now you have come to us, Gabriel White, to heal Dhaarmikwar. Soon the Fiery Eye will be able to speak justice again. Soon the Hand will once again show the golden path."

Gabriel White nodded and remained silent. He did not let out what was going on inside him.

The priest looked out of the window where the silhouette of the mountains began to shine. Bright streaks of light appeared over the peaks and would soon fall into the cave.

"It's time," he said and solemnly took the Silver Hand from Gabriel White. Then he mounted it on the stump of the statue's arm, where it fitted perfectly. There even seemed to be a holding mechanism, for Jupiter heard a soft click. The Silver Hand was now back in place.

Then the priest reverently took the Fiery Eye in his hand. He climbed onto a quickly provided stool to the level of Dhaarmikwar's face to carefully insert the ruby with the thumbs and forefingers of both hands. The stone fit perfectly into the cavity.

The prayers grew louder. The music swelled. The priest said something, this time again in his own language.

Meanwhile, Jupiter was feverishly thinking about how he could take the gun from White before he caused any harm.

"The one who healed Dhaarmikwar is given a special honour," the priest suddenly announced in English. He gave White a friendly nod and motioned him to step in front of the statue. White took a few steps to stand before Dhaarmikwar.

That's when it happened. Everyone noticed it at the same time. A murmur rippled through the cave and the musicians stopped, startled.

The Fiery Eye had begun to glow!

Bob felt the ground give way beneath him. He could not control himself sliding over the edge until his foot landed on the gnarled little tree that already supported half of Vikram's weight.

Branches poked into his ribs, the wood groaned and a root tore out of the rock face. Desperately, Bob held on to something. It was Vikram's backpack.

Horried, Vikram gripped the rope tighter to avoid being dragged down by Bob. "You have to hold on somewhere else... or we'll both fall!" Vikram gasped.

Bob grabbed the rope tied to his belt, and then let go of the backpack. Then he climbed out of the branches. His feet found a foothold on the rock face. Gasping, Bob closed his eyes for a few seconds. Then he looked for a way out of the predicament.

“You need to get rid of that backpack, Vikram. It is still stuck. Free yourself from the straps! You can’t fall, I’m right behind you and secured with the rope.”

Vikram hesitated, but then carefully let go of one hand. Bob supported him. With some contortions, he finally freed his arms from the backpack straps. “Made it!”

“Goodbye,” Bob said and pushed the backpack off the Indian boy. It fell staggering into the depths. “Now we have to get back up there somehow. You first, Vikram, I’ll push from behind!”

Vikram tried, but because of his injured leg, he could not lift himself up, and his arms had already become too weak from holding for so long. “I... I can’t do it!”

“You must!”

Suddenly a jolt went through the tightly stretched rope. Bob gasped in fright. Then he realized what the jolt had been. Up there, where he had tied the rope to a boulder, was someone!

“That must be Pete!” Bob looked up the cliff. A figure was staring down at them... but it was not Pete.

It was Rama Sidri Rhandur!

Jupiter held his breath. There was no doubt about it—the ruby was glowing as if a fire had been lit inside it! Movement came into the crowd. Everyone whispered to each other, and stared at Gabriel White. He, in turn, gazed spellbound at the Fiery Eye.

Suddenly someone shouted something. As if on cue, everyone shouted in confusion. The priest raised his arms and calmed the faithful.

When he turned to White, his gaze was hard. “The Fiery Eye has come to life, and it has spoken. A criminal has come before Dhaarmikwar. You are a traitor, Gabriel White!”

For seconds, it was so quiet in the cave temple that Jupiter feared his heartbeat could be heard.

Slowly, White’s face twisted into his infamous smile. “That’s true,” he said and pulled his gun out of his pocket.

The people gasped in fright.

“Everybody over there!” White ordered, using his gun to direct the crowd to a corner. “Tell them, old man!” he ordered the priest. “Everybody over there, now!”

Fearful, the priest followed White’s command. The people huddled on one side of the Dhaarmikwar statue while not taking their eyes off the gun. White himself stood in front of the exit so that no one could escape. He was now less than two metres away with his back to the First Investigator.

“Don’t worry, I won’t hurt you,” White said, but there was nothing reassuring in his voice. “I’ll be leaving soon. I’m just waiting for the sun to come up.”

He did not have to wait long as the sun had risen enough for outside to be brighter. The light that came in through the window now shone directly at the statue’s hands, in particular, the Silver Hand, causing it to glow brightly. That was when the magic happened.

The glowing light from the Silver Hand reflected off one of the oddly-positioned mirrors on the cave wall and shone directly back onto the Hand, casting a sharp shadow on the wall mural on one side of the statue! That was the shadow of the hand White was waiting for!

Jupiter had to do something now! He crept up behind White, but a few devotees noticed him and flinched!

That made White sense something and he immediately whirled around. Before Jupiter could even reach for the gun, White had already pointed it at him. “You!”

Jupiter had squandered his advantage. He looked at the window where the sun was rising behind the mountain. The First Investigator walked towards it.

“Stop right there!” White ordered him.

Jupiter obeyed. Now he was standing directly in front of the window, blocking out the sun’s rays. Immediately, the Silver Hand stopped glowing, meaning the shadow of the hand disappeared as well.

“How did you get here!” hissed White.

“Does it matter, Mr White? Give up. You’re not going to get what you want... or are you planning to shoot all these people here?”

White quickly overcame his surprise. Calmly he replied: “That’s not necessary. I just have to shoot you—if you don’t move away from the window.”

Jupiter did not move from the spot.

“Get away from the window, boy!”

“No! You won’t get the treasure!”

White smiled. “Yes, I will...” He stretched his arm to point his gun at the First Investigator. The devotees gasped in fright.

“For the last time, Jupiter Jones, get away from the window! It won’t serve anyone well to stand in my way.”

The First Investigator saw in his mind’s eye how this criminal had pushed Vikram down the precipice. White was not bluffing. Juve’s brain was running at full speed. What he was supposed to do now?

“I’ll give you three seconds... One...”

Suddenly the priest stepped forward and walked to Jupiter. He did not say a word, but merely looked at Jupiter out of bronze-coloured eyes. They were eyes like Vikram’s—mysterious and hypnotic.

“It’s all right,” he said, touching Jupiter on the arm and gently pulling him away from the window. The First Investigator did not resist.

“You saved the boy’s life, old man,” White said with satisfaction, turning to the statue.

The sunlight now fell unhindered on the Silver Hand and it glowed again. Jupiter’s gaze immediately fell on the wall where the shadow was cast. Only now did he realize what was depicted on the mural—a mountain landscape, but not just any mountain landscape. It was the very mountain range that could be seen out of the window. He could also see that the shadow cast by the Silver Hand pointed to a particular peak on the mountain range. It was the Mountain of No Return!

“The shadow of the hand shows the golden path,” White said reverently, “when day and night, when sunrise and sunset, when heaven and earth are in balance.” It was the phrase from Bonnie Newman’s book!

Fascinated, White stepped nearer to the mural. On closer inspection, one could see that the shadow of the Silver Hand’s forefinger was pointing to a black spot drawn in the right flank of the mountain.

“A cave!” White whispered. He traced an arc through the air with his finger, from the mural to the window. Quickly, he took out a pair of binoculars from his leather bag. He had to shield it so the sun wouldn’t burn his retinas through the magnifying glass.

“Indeed,” he said. “A cave!” His eyes lit up. He kept his binoculars and turned. “That’s all I wanted to know,” he said. “If anyone should follow me, he will pay for it with his life.” He weighed his gun demonstratively in his hand. “—And you, Jupiter Jones, have been lucky once again.”

With that, Gabriel White left the cave, leaving Jupiter and the Servants of Justice stunned.

16. The Shadow of the Hand

“We... we have to go after him,” Jupiter said tonelessly. “We can’t let him get the treasure!”

But the priest only shook his head. “It’s all right,” he said. “Let him go.”

Then footsteps approached from the tunnel. The devotees huddled together in fear again. However, it was not White who rushed breathlessly into the cave.

“Pete!”

“Jupe! Thank goodness! White just went out of the cave! He had a gun in his hand!”

“Did he see you?”

“No, I was hiding. He went straight down the slope. What happened here?”

Jupiter pulled Pete aside and whispered: “You just missed the most incredible thing—the Fiery Eye glowed... exposing White as a criminal! Then—”

“No way!” Pete exclaimed, but before he could continue, someone else stumbled into the cave.

“Bob!” Jupe called out.

“Here you are!” Bob shouted with relief. “Pete, you’re here too! Why didn’t we see you?” Bob looked around irritated. “What’s going on here anyway?” Only now did Bob realize where he was and that they were not alone.

The Servants of Justice had sensed that there was no danger from the newcomers. Hesitantly, some of them approached and eyed The Three Investigators curiously.

“White got what he wanted,” Jupiter said gloomily, pointing to the shadow of the Silver Hand that had already wandered a little way from the spot on the mural. “The shadow of the hand shows the golden path, but there’s nothing we can do about that now. Where is Vikram?”

Bob was about to reply, but was interrupted by the priest: “Vikram? My son—is here?”

“Your... son?” asked Pete, blinking a few times. “Who... who are you anyway?”

“My name is Darshan Chakrabarti. I am the chief priest of this temple. Where is Vikram?”

“He’s hurt, but it’s not that bad,” Bob said. “He’s making his way up here slowly, and he asked me to come first to stop White.”

“Stop him?” repeated Pete incredulously. “But I thought they were working together.”

Jupiter shook his head and briefly told Pete what they had overheard and observed at dawn. “I just hope the two of them don’t run into each other now.”

“No,” said Bob. “I saw White take a different route going away. I’m sure he still thinks that Vikram has fallen down the cliff.”

“Good,” Jupiter said. “White is a ruthless rascal... and smart too, but he was wrong about one thing—Vikram is not a Shikaaree. He’s a Servant of Justice.”

Bob could confirm that. “When he was hanging on the rope, I could see his forehead—no three dots. White got it wrong.”

Jupiter turned to the priest. “It was always Vikram’s goal to bring the Fiery Eye and the Silver Hand back here, is that right?”

Chakrabarti nodded. Then he spoke to two men in his language. The two nodded and then left the cave.

“You didn’t send them after White, did you?” asked Jupiter, startled. “That man is dangerous!”

“No. They are getting Vikram. We need him.”

“I hope they’re careful,” Bob said, “because there’s someone else around out there. Vikram and I were hanging from the rope and couldn’t climb up without help. Suddenly, Rhandur appeared! He helped us! He pulled up the rope until we were over the edge.”

“Rhandur!” cried Pete. “I saw him last night too! Rather, I heard him.” He briefly told of his encounter in the darkness. “He didn’t notice me, but I hardly slept a wink and left as soon as the moon came out and gave a little light. I thought I had to warn you about him.”

“Bob, have you spoken to Rhandur?” Jupiter wanted to know.

Bob shook his head. “When we finally got up the cliff, he was gone.”

“Puzzling...” Jupiter pinched his lower lip.

“Rhandur,” Chakrabarti repeated. “Does that man belong to the Shikaaree?”

“Not now,” Jupiter explained. “The Shikaaree have disowned him. We don’t know what he’s up to.”

“I will post guards,” Chakrabarti said and signalled to a few of his men. “If he is alone, he poses no danger. However, he must not set foot in this cave, otherwise he will find what we have hidden from his kind for decades.”

Suddenly, the devotees became restless. Some of them started murmuring, looking at the Dhaarmikwar statue again and again.

Chakrabarti explained: “Time is running out. Soon the sun will have moved up higher. I cannot wait for Vikram to make it back here and so I have to make an urgent decision.”

That was true. The light that came in from the window at sunrise and shone directly at the deity’s face, and later moved to the hands, had already gone down further. In a while more, Dhaarmikwar would no longer be bathed in the light.

“Our tradition is that we only enter the golden path on the holy days—twice a year... but only when it is illuminated by the sun.”

“The golden path?” asked Jupiter. “You mean the path that leads to the treasure? But it’s out there towards the mountains.”

The priest shook his head. “For more than fifty years, we thought that the honour of opening the path would go to the Servant of Justice who brought back the Fiery Eye and the Silver Hand. However, it was not Vikram who brought them to us. It was a traitor.”

The priest looked at The Three Investigators thoughtfully. “As the chief priest, I have to make an important decision—an exception, in fact. I do not yet know who you three boys are, but you have shown great courage.” Then he specifically turned to Jupiter and said: “I would like to invite you to help us with our ceremony. We do not have much time, and I hope you will accept. The window for this ceremony will end very soon as the sun moves up higher.”

Jupiter swallowed. He didn’t know at all what the priest wanted from him.

“He is not one of us!” someone protested in English.

“But he was willing to give his life to protect the golden path,” Chakrabarti explained, and raised his hand to the devotees to calm them down. Then spoke to them in his language, before turning back to the First Investigator and smiled. “Would you do us the honour?”

Jupiter looked into the crowd. “I... I don’t know—”

“He will do it, Chief Priest,” Pete interrupted. “Go on, Juve! Go on! We came all the way here to help them.”

“You can do it,” Chakrabarti said and held out his hand. “You are a clever boy.”

Hesitantly, Jupiter stepped next to the priest in front of Dhaarmikwar. Everyone looked up at the Fiery Eye, but the ruby remained dim. Chakrabarti nodded with satisfaction and

dipped his fingers into a small bowl of red powder. With it he drew a symbol on Jupiter's forehead while chanting a prayer.

"Just now, you saw a shadow of the hand," said Chakrabarti, "but that was not the correct shadow."

"Huh? ... Then what—"

"Jupe, concentrate!" hissed Pete softly. "You are the chosen one here!"

Jupe's brain was buzzing. "The shadow of the hand shows the golden path," he repeated, "when day and night, when sunrise and sunset, when heaven and earth are in balance. This refers to today, when the day and night are in balance, and sunrise and sunset are exactly opposite each other... but heaven and earth—" He frowned.

The chief priest helped him out: "Right now, the forefinger of the Silver Hand is pointing to the sky..."

Then he took Jupiter's hand and placed it on the Silver Hand of the statue. He nodded to Jupe encouragingly.

Suddenly, the First Investigator understood what the priest was hinting at. He remembered the soft click he had heard when the priest mounted the Hand earlier. As the forefinger was now pointing to the sky, representing heaven, he had to get it to point to the earth!

He carefully turned the Hand anti-clockwise like a human hand would. It could be easily turned so he knew he got it right—and he continued to complete a 180-degree turn.

Suddenly the cave trembled. Everyone, including Jupiter, involuntarily backed away from Dhaarmikwar.

Jupiter was quick to realize what had happened. With the Silver Hand in its new position, the glowing light now reflected off another mirror, this time on the ceiling. Like before, the reflected light shone directly back onto the Hand, but this time, casting a shadow downwards!

The very next moment, the pedestal on which the statue sat moved backwards as if by magic, revealing a large opening in the ground. A staircase led downwards.

The sunlight coming through the window now shone into the secret opening. The top steps, which were made of a shimmering metal, glowed golden. The Servants of Justice approached in awe.

"The golden path," Chakrabarti said with emotion. "I was just a child when I last entered it." He turned to The Three Investigators. "This path leads to our true treasure."

17. The True Treasure

Chief Priest Chakrabarti also drew a symbol with red powder on foreheads of Pete and Bob. Then he turned to speak to a woman, before he proceeded to go down the stairs. The Servants of Justice followed one after the other. Some held candles in their hands, others had their hands pressed together in prayer position.

When there were only three or four people left outside the opening, the woman turned to Jupiter, Pete and Bob, smiled kindly at them and told them to go down as well.

Dry, strange-smelling air enveloped them on the way down. At first, the steps wound tightly like a spiral staircase. Then they led straight down for a while before leading into a tunnel. The tunnel was of natural origin, as the uneven ground and walls revealed. It was slightly sloping and led deeper into the mountain. Small stalactites hung from the ceiling. Since no one spoke, The Three Investigators did not break the silence.

Then a murmur was heard in front of them. Pete, as the tallest in the group, could see over everyone's heads, and he saw that the tunnel was widening into a cave—a cave that seemed to grow larger with every step. Only when The Three Investigators reached the end of the tunnel did they realize how huge the cave really was.

The rock walls rose like a cathedral and were lost in the darkness above their heads. The light from the few candles was not enough for them to see the ceiling. Only when Chakrabarti began to light torches attached to the walls did the cave reveal more and more secrets.

The walls were artistically painted with scenes from a strange world of gods. The mural seemed to depict stories whose meaning remained unfamiliar to The Three Investigators. At the far end of the cave, a large stone pedestal rose up about two metres high, like a huge altar. It was not until the torches to the left and right of it were also lit that The Three Investigators saw the huge statue sitting on the pedestal.

All three of them lost their breath.

“Dhaarmikwar!” whispered Bob. “The god of justice! And it is huge! The statue must be ten metres high!”

“More,” Jupiter murmured. “It was hewn out of a mighty rock!”

“His robe is golden!” marvelled Bob. “He looks so real! Like he’s going to get up at any moment!”

Pete was silent and stared up spellbound.

Dhaarmikwar’s gaze was majestically directed into the distance, as if he could effortlessly penetrate the mountain that surrounded him. His golden robe cast vivid dancing reflections of the light from the torches on the cave walls. The third eye on his forehead glowed blood-red, but Pete realized that it was only painted on.

The Servants of Justice had come as close to the pedestal as they dared in the face of the statue’s overwhelming presence. All had sunk to their knees and prayed. Then the priest intoned a chant and the drums and flutes that Gabriel White had silenced were brought out again. The music filled the cave dome like a concert hall.

For half an eternity, The Three Investigators listened to the mesmerizing chanting and gazed at the huge statue without uttering a word.

At some point, the two men Chakrabarti had sent came back. In their midst, they supported Vikram. The boy did not even notice The Three Investigators, but stared reverently up at the face of the deity before he too gave himself over to prayer.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob did not know how long they watched the religious ceremony. They were exhilarated and at the same time felt peace and calmness especially after all the turmoil that had happened over the past week. It was not yet over when Chakrabarti at some point broke away from the group and joined them while the music and prayers continued in the background.

"I have not forgotten you," he said, "as I have to attend to our prayers."

"We understand," Jupiter replied. "This place is... incredible!"

The priest nodded. "No one has been here for fifty years. I was afraid it might have collapsed in the recent earthquake, but Dhaarmikwar protected it. Here, he is more powerful than anywhere else."

"So this is the Temple of Justice," Pete said. "That up there is—"

"—Only the entrance," Chakrabarti confirmed. "Maharaja Rajendra Sinha knew about this huge cave and had this statue built at that time. Everything was done in secret so that the Shikaaree, who resented his renunciation of their faith, would not know about it. To build this image of Dhaarmikwar, the maharaja spent all his wealth."

"The deity's robe is gold-plated," Jupiter noted, "so the maharaja's treasure is here, and it cannot be stolen."

"Correct. So far, no one outside our community knows where this sacred place is. Some have tried to find it, but not after the last traitor who disappeared over fifty years ago with the Fiery Eye and the Silver Hand. That was a dark day for the Servants of Justice. We feared the discovery of the temple. So we hid the cave entrance under large boulders and spread the rumour that the temple had disappeared. We have not entered this actual temple since then."

"Would it be possible to open the entrance in another way?" asked Jupiter. "—Without the Silver Hand?"

"It's possible," Chakrabarti admitted, "but we didn't. We had been careless and allowed the two sacred items to be stolen. So we repented by not entering the temple... but that wait ends today. It's an extraordinary day. The younger ones of us are here for the first time today, and never before has a stranger been to this place—especially not someone outside our community, let alone from another country. Now you are here." Chakrabarti laughed softly. "—And I still don't know who you are."

"I can explain that to you, father." The Three Investigators had not noticed that Vikram had come closer. His father embraced him. "It's a long story," Vikram continued, "and it begins at its end—with an apology."

Vikram turned to Jupiter. "The Servants of Justice spent years preparing me for the task to recover the two sacred items. They sent me to a good school so I could find my way in the world. When I was ready, I flew to America with my two brothers."

Jupiter looked at him questioningly. "Your two brothers?"

Vikram nodded. "They supported me. I couldn't do many things because I was always around Gabriel White."

"The two Indians boys who confronted Mr Dwiggin!" it occurred to Pete. "The ones I tracked to that little temple in the mountains! So they were your brothers! What was it about that temple?"

"They had built it in the small cave that opens exactly towards the rising sun, following our custom. They went there to ask Dhaarmikwar for help. After noticing you, they quickly dismantled everything and left. After all, they didn't know who you were."

“The third eye in the little statue—”

“It was only a replica. At the time we had no idea where the real ruby was, but we did everything we could to find it.”

“Like confronting Mr Dwiggins?” Bob remarked sombrely.

“Jupiter had said when I first met him that Mr Dwiggins was not trustworthy,” Vikram explained. “I thought he might be hiding important information. My two brothers went to look for it. They were not supposed to scare him, but I guess they did—just as I have done much worse.” Vikram lowered his eyes guiltily. “I made a pact with a criminal to achieve my goal. To me, you were just someone who disrupted my plans, Jupiter. I thought all Americans were like Mr White and could not be trusted. I treated you cruelly, and especially Gus. I was wrong. I didn’t realize you were good people. I’m sorry, Jupiter. Please forgive me.”

Jupiter nodded. “If you had treated us differently, Gabriel White would have become suspicious.”

“He knew what I wanted to do along,” Vikram objected.

“Yes, but you couldn’t have known that,” Jupe consoled him. “It’s the result that counts, Vikram, and the result is that the Fiery Eye and the Silver Hand are finally back to where they belong. The Servants of Justice have their temple back... and we have had a great adventure.” The First Investigator reached out and grasped Vikram’s hand.

18. The End of a Great Adventure

Much later, when they climbed up the last steps of the stairs together with Vikram and reached the secret opening, the sun was high in the sky. Music and chants still echoed in their heads, and the numbing scent of incense was still in their noses. The awe-inspiring atmosphere of the gigantic cave temple would not leave them for a long time.

Jupe explained to Pete and Bob how sunlight from the irregular-shaped window had come off the Silver Hand and reflected by a mirror back onto the Hand to cast a shadow on the wall mural. Then they looked at the mural and Jupiter showed them the black spot that the shadow had pointed to.

Pete went over to the window and looked at the Mountain of No Return. Bob rummaged out a pair of binoculars from his backpack and looked into the distance as well.

“What’s with White now?” Pete asked.

“The artists who painted the mountain range on the wall knew what they were doing,” Vikram explained. “They laid a false trail for the uninitiated.”

“But White will realize that at some point,” Pete said. “Aren’t you afraid he’ll come back?”

Vikram raised his voice to reply, but Bob suddenly shouted: “Look!” He pointed outside. “I see something moving over there. It’s small but it could be people! ... Yes, there are people there! Over there on the plain, in front of the edge of the forest at the foot of the mountain!”

Pete snatched the binoculars from Bob and looked. “You’re right! That’s White! And... I don’t believe it! The second one is Rhandur! I recognize him by his cane!”

Vikram and Jupiter took turns looking through the binoculars. In the end, there was no doubt.

“Rhandur is following White!” said Jupiter. “But White doesn’t seem to have noticed yet. They’ve just reached the edge of the forest now and... and I can’t see them already.”

“He’s going after White because he wants the treasure!” Bob suspected. “Perhaps he wants to go back to the Shikaaree, to his old community! He hopes they’ll take him back if he succeeds! So my hunch wasn’t wrong then. I already didn’t trust him yesterday... but I am still thankful to him for helping us up the cliff.”

“But what happens to them now?” asked Pete. “I mean, they would realize at some point that there’s nothing there. Maybe they’ll get together and both come back here!”

The Three Investigators looked questioningly at Vikram, but he did not look in the least worried.

“They won’t come back,” he said softly. “There is a reason why that place is called the Mountain of No Return.”

A little later, The Three Investigators made their way back. They wanted to reach Pleshiwar before nightfall otherwise Solomon Charles might have the idea of sending out a search party. So they said goodbye to Vikram and his father.

Although nobody specifically mentioned it, it went without saying that the three of them would never reveal the secret of the hidden temple to anyone.

The Three Investigators covered the first stretch to the scree valley in silence. Each of them was lost in his own thoughts.

When they had climbed down the scree slope and walked through the bottom of the valley, Pete broke the silence: "What do you think Vikram meant by White and Rhandur not returning? Just because the Mountain of No Return is dangerous doesn't mean that everyone who goes there will not return... does it?"

"Maybe there's a curse on the mountain," Bob murmured, giving Jupiter a sideways glance, "like on the ruby."

"Don't tell Jupe that," Pete reminded him, "not even now—even though he saw with his own eyes what happened in the temple."

"Saw what happened?" asked Bob, irritated.

"Oh, that's right, you weren't there," Pete said. "Tell him, Jupe!"

Jupe hesitated, but eventually said: "When White stepped in front of the deity, the Fiery Eye glowed brightly. That revealed that White is a traitor."

"Really?" Bob remarked in surprise.

The First Investigator then nodded with a sombre expression. "And I've been racking my brains the whole time about how that was possible. I can't think of a logical explanation, but there has to be one!"

"I'll be careful not to say anything about magical gemstones," Pete said. "I know you don't want to hear it, Jupe. You've thoroughly talked me out of the idea that the Fiery Eye could be cursed... so I suppose it also won't have magical powers to expose any criminals, huh?"

Jupiter mumbled something unintelligible and Pete grinned to himself.

The steep climb out of the bottom of the valley began and for a while they were fully focussed on climbing the scree slope. After that, the way back was a breeze. It was so pleasant downhill that Jupiter even took the lead for a while. However, this was due to Pete deliberately staying a bit behind.

"Bob!" he called when he was sure Jupiter could not hear him.

"What is it?"

"The Fiery Eye thing," Pete murmured. "There is a logical explanation."

"Really?"

Pete grinned broadly. "I was at the temple a few minutes earlier than I had admitted. I just saw Jupe go in, but I didn't want to follow him because I didn't know what was going on. So I looked around for a back entrance."

"But there is no back entrance."

"Right, but I didn't know that. I climbed around on the rocks and was suddenly above the cave temple. Through a crack in the rocks I could see right in! I watched the whole scene with White and the statue."

"So?"

"When White stepped up in front of the statue, I thought it would be a total blast if the Fiery Eye started glowing then."

"And?"

"I suddenly remembered that I still have this with me." Pete reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out an object.

Bob's eyes snapped open. "Your laser pointer!"

"Shh, not so loud!"

"You... you aimed the laser pointer at the Fiery Eye and—"

Pete nodded and his grin grew even wider.

“Pete, that was—”

“—Ingenious, I know!” Pete remarked. “It would have been fun to see Jupe’s reaction, but I couldn’t.”

“Due to the circumstances, the ruby could still have shone by itself, couldn’t it?” Bob wondered.

“True, but I couldn’t take the chance,” Pete replied.

“There’s no way we could know about it now!” Bob remarked.

“It doesn’t really matter to me,” Pete said. “What’s great is that Jupe was stumped for once! Ha! This is a great moment in the history of The Three Investigators!”

Pete wasn’t daft. On the way down, he had figured out a possibility. Sunlight coming through the crack at a certain angle could have illuminated the ruby, but he was glad that he had artificially done it, and everything turned out well. Most of all, he was now enjoying every moment of it.

“Anyway, you saved the day with your quick thinking. Good on you, Pete!” Bob patted him on the shoulder.

“Thanks, but don’t tell Jupe,” Pete requested.

“You don’t want to tell him?”

“Maybe. Maybe not... Maybe never! We’ll see. I want to get back at him for all those times he made fun of me!” Pete winked at Bob and quickened his steps. “Hey, Jupe! Not so fast! Why don’t you wait for us?”

They reached Pleshiwar before sunset.